

Ritz-Carlton's *Gold Standard* Service

The Gold Standard Service offered by Ritz Carlton is in fact their Sales Process. The similarities between the hotel industry and the apartment business are many. Hotels depend upon providing an expected level of service to its guests starting with the initial sales (reservations) experience and greeting. Guest loyalty, satisfaction, and retention can be enhanced with every personal interaction including the initial inquiry by website visits and phone calls to the reservation center.

Ellis thought it would be helpful to see what we could learn from the hospitality industry, and we only wanted to interview the very finest! As Gables Residential and dozens of other apartment companies have recognized in their training, the epitome of exemplary customer service among US companies is the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Group. Established in 1983 with the purchase of The Ritz-Carlton, Boston, and the rights to the name Ritz-Carlton, the management company has grown from one hotel to 58 hotels worldwide (18,475 guest rooms) with plans for further expansion in Europe, Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the Americas.

Every part of this company's culture is based on providing the finest customer service, beginning with its infamous motto that exemplifies the anticipatory service provided by all staff members.

"We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen."

Who is on your team? That is the starting point for developing world class service according to **Tom Donovan**, General Manager at the **Ritz-Carlton Bachelor Gulch Hotel and Resort** just outside of Vail, Colorado in the mountain village of Avon. It is the thoughtful recruitment and hiring that creates the possibility of appropriate and memorable "customer engagements" with the Ritz-Carlton guests in the future. Only the finest *Ladies and Gentleman* can maintain the company's distinguished **Gold Standards** (http://www.ritzcarlton.com/corporate/about_us/gold_standards.asp).

Donovan explains the four key components in developing teams that can truly carry the Ritz-Carlton banner. Maintaining an extraordinary staff is especially challenging at his particular resort since the **Ritz-Carlton Bachelor Gulch** is a ski destination that must ramp up its workforce each season! Listen up, apartment operators! These four steps show the company's commitment to the "selection, growth, recognition, and development of talented *ladies and gentlemen*." These can certainly benefit our industry.

1. Make sure employee selection is First Class. It all starts with finding the best candidates. Donovan says that the Ritz-Carlton has a long-term relationship with Lincoln, Nebraska, based Talent-Plus, an international psychological selection and human resource consulting firm. In order to place people in roles where they are most likely to be successful, a *Quality Selection Process* (QSP) was developed in partnership with Talent-Plus. The Ritz-Carlton QSP sets a standard of excellence in "casting" the right person to the right job, ensuring the best customer service. "By conducting research with employees and customizing interviews, candidates are identified who are most likely to be the best performers in specific roles," says Donovan. A *Talent Benchmark* for all hotel positions from housekeeper to General Manager has been established. Candidates are then compared to the appropriate benchmark, enabling the company to hire individuals with attributes and characteristics most like their current top performers.

2. Employee Orientation is Day One! "No employee can begin work at a Ritz-Carlton Hotel without first attending orientation. Period!" reports Donovan, who tells us that the formula for the two-day employee orientation creates a memorable event for the new team member and establishes the Ritz-Carlton culture and expectations from the very beginning of this relationship. "Everyone remembers their first day at a new job, but they have no idea what happened on the second day! In fact, they may not even remember the afternoon of the first day. That is why we make our orientation, especially in the morning, a significant emotional event!" And memorable the orientations are! The hotel General Manager *always* conducts the first hour of orientation, communicating and modeling the attitude and culture that defines the Ritz-Carlton service promise. Donovan explains, "If the top person thinks it is important enough for him to be there, that says better than most anything else that this is a serious and relevant event!" What takes place the first three hours of that day sets the tone for the new associate's entire work experience. At the end of this two-day indoctrination, employees buy in and become a part of the Ritz-Carlton "**mystique**" they refer to, not just working for the company.

Orientation dates are set in advance and all department managers plan their staffing around this schedule. Donavan jokes that any employee in any company who does not attend an initial planned orientation will receive an “orientation” regardless; but not in the format or with the content that necessarily instills the appropriate corporate culture or mission! Donavan adds, “If we don’t provide that *significant emotional event* on the new employee’s first day, then it may come from ‘Sally the terrorist’ or ‘Dave the downer’! In other words, not all employees, even the high performers, are equipped to provide a new employee with a proper orientation.”

A six-hour follow-up to orientation, termed **Day 21**, takes place about three weeks after the new employee’s start date. Again, the General Manager conducts the first hour soliciting feedback about the new employee’s training and experience to date. Within an open and free atmosphere, the GM asks, “How is it going? What did we miss in your training? Are there issues we need to discuss or explain?” Per Donavan, “The **Day 21** meeting allows us to fill in any holes that were not covered in the initial orientation.” Orientation does not stop even after **Day 21**. The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Group requires all employees to be re-oriented annually at the **Day 365** orientation and awards meeting. This one day meeting with lunch is used to remind and reinforce the Gold Standards including the Credo, Motto, Service Values, and Employee Promise. A recertification test is not a concern because employees have averaged 120 hours of training at this point. Service recognition for one, five, and ten years of employment are also made at the **Day 365** *significant emotional event*.

3. Training. First Class employee selection and a memorable orientation on day one set the stage for an ongoing training program that is as much a part of the company’s culture as is the **Gold Standard Service**. Each Ritz-Carlton Hotel has a full time Director of Training and each department has one person with training responsibilities. With an average of 120 and as many as 200 hours of training the first year, Ritz-Carlton associates are programmed for success. Top performers in each of the hotel’s 35 departments are drafted to be trainers in their areas of expertise. They become certified by attending a three-day “Train the Trainer” event and are provided customized curriculum and a rigid training schedule specific to their department. “Managers do not train!” says Donavan. “They don’t know the job and they don’t have the time.” Instead, these specifically prepared employee trainers can dedicate a full day or more of hands-on guidance and attention to new staff members. The new employee is learning from an associate who will be there to provide support and input for the long term. Department managers ensure that the training schedule is followed, and on **Day 21**, the employee can give feedback about the process. The Ritz-Carlton training program ranks in the top 10 annually of *Training Magazine*’s list of the Top 100 Training Organizations.

4. Daily Lineup. Much like a “team huddle”, the Ritz-Carlton **Lineup** is the system-wide 15 minute gathering of employees every morning in their departments. The Lineup schedule is standard throughout the company; five minutes discussing what is happening at the corporate level, another five minutes talking about their hotel events and gatherings of the day and week and important guests arriving, and finally five minutes reviewing one of the **Gold Standards 20 Basics**. The Lineup may be the company’s most important tool in maintaining their superior service standards. Donavan tells us, “Good working relationships require communication. The Lineup allows daily communication and maintains a sense of purpose for all employees.” It is truly the company adhesive and bond as all 25,000 Ritz-Carlton employees worldwide are doing the same Lineup in their locales. As department team members gather, a prepared agenda is used to reinforce service values and define the Ritz-Carlton culture and message. “Companies with the best and strongest corporate culture push it every day. You cannot control every employee/guest experience but in the Lineup, we can influence it,” says Donavan. The Lineup is also used to reinforce the company’s long-standing principle of employee empowerment. Employees cannot evade difficult situations by muttering, “It’s not my job.” In the Lineup, Ritz-Carlton team members are reminded that job descriptions are irrelevant when guest satisfaction is at risk. Even a new employee can commit up to \$2,000 of the hotel’s dollars to quickly resolve a guest concern! That is one of the fundamentals of the world-class service provided by the Ritz-Carlton *Ladies and Gentlemen*.

“The line-up is our daily commercial to the employees,” Donavan notes. “The message of service and the review of our core values create the human beings responsible for the Ritz-Carlton **mystique**.” This Ritz-Carlton “mystique” is more than a vague or ambiguous aura. It is the message that the employees, and ultimately all customers and vendors, proclaim about the hotel’s services and facilities throughout the world. It is the buzz about those customer services that are always delivered with such style and dedication that makes the accompanying employee declaration, “*It’s my pleasure.*” ring true and genuine. These constant praises, the “mystique” about the Ritz-Carlton, has minimized the need for print and other advertising as satisfied guests and employees provide sufficient acclaim and recommendation!

Customer Service and Sales are synonymous at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Group. All sales and reservations positions require the same training and customer service skills as any other hotel employee. The job description for a sales reservation agent includes the signature requirement to have the *“Ability to project a positive attitude over the telephone and have the spontaneous desire to assist others and provide excellent service.”* The Director of Sales at Donovan’s Avon, CO, hotel location also has a services/sales mandate in their official job responsibilities; *“Must be sales and relationship driven and service oriented.”* Customer service and guest satisfaction remain the foundation in all customer engagements, even sales! Donovan told us, *“The employees in sales have the benefit of selling the Ritz-Carlton experience that they witness and participate in every day. Our employees are emotionally attached to the product and their exuberance spills over into their sales presentations.”*

Ellis recently called the toll free Ritz-Carlton reservation center and were treated to a delightful, engaging representative who attempted to sell us golf reservations and an upgraded room while remaining friendly, low key, and service-oriented. While she strongly suggested we make a reservation *“NOW”* to hold the room rate, she was gracious and understanding when we said we needed to consult our travel partners. True to the Ritz Carlton form, she ended the call with, *“It’s been my pleasure to assist you.”* We sensed she truly meant it!