

04/05/12 - What a Russian Hair Stylist Teaches Us About Differentiation
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Yes, you read that title correctly. Let me explain.

The other day, I was getting (what I thought was) a routine haircut. As the hair stylist and I were shooting the breeze, she told me a little bit about a three-month trip to her home city ? Moscow.

While she was there, she needed to (ironically enough) get *her* hair cut. Opening up the directory of hair stylists (yep, they have their own directory), she called one ? expecting to simply set up an appointment and go in. But that's not what happened.

This is where the story gets interesting.

When she called for an appointment, instead of saying, "*See you then!*" they asked her, "*What time do you want us to pick you up?*" Confused, she tried to explain she'd get there herself, yet they insisted ? emphasizing that the pick up was included in her fee (which was about \$25 in our terms). So sure enough, a half hour before her appointment, a car service arrives to taxi her away.

But that's not all.

Apparently, they kept her waiting at the salon a little longer than anticipated. So how did they handle it? Instead of a simple, "*We're very sorry,*" they instead asked, "*What would you like for lunch?*" ? at no additional cost. So for the price of one (pretty reasonable) haircut, my stylist got car service and free lunch to seal the deal.

The surprising thing to me was hearing about such innovation in a place not typically known for it. Yet it's amazing how **intense competition triggers innovation**. Taking a look at the Russian economy in the last ten years, you'll find that the cosmetics industry ? and that includes hair salons ? is one of the fastest growing sectors. In fact, 15-20 new hair salons are opening each month ? and that's only in Moscow.

I'd say the competition is fierce.

But what I love about this story is the way it shows a new-old approach to **differentiation**.

Many smaller companies believe they don't have enough money, man power, or momentum to effectively differentiate themselves from their competition. Now, I'm not saying everyone needs to start sending a car service to their clients (and really, I'm not convinced about the profitability of such offerings), but what I want to emphasize is that **in today's world ? in markets driven by the need to "humanize" or get closer to customers** ? *there is still one simple (and potentially free way) to differentiate: DELIGHT your customer!*

Seth Godin says it best here (emphases mine):

"A few organizations have figured out **how to turn customer service into a marketing opportunity** and thus a profit center. They figure **if they've got your attention**, if they're talking to you at a moment when you care a great deal, **they can turn that into an opportunity to delight**. *And being delighted is remarkable and worth talking about.*"

To bring us back to the story, the truth is that my hair stylist friend wasn't even that crazy about the haircut she received that day. Her stylist was a little new and inexperienced, and gave her a "so-so" haircut. But did she care? Not really; in fact, she was *delighted*. This salon thought raised their competitive edge ? and even with *so-so* results, they differentiated themselves enough to secure a **delighted customer**.

I'd say that's something we'd all like to attain (hopefully with better than so-so results, of course).

- **Do you have any stories about a time when a company delighted you with their customer service?**
- **What ways have you sought to differentiate yourself in the market?**
- **Have you ever used the *delight-strategy* to set yourselves apart from the pack?**