

Stop Responding to the Same Old Bells



JIM FISHER
is CEO of
IMST Corp., Houston.
Reach him at
jfisher@imstcorp.com.

We all feel at times that our dogs have trained us to respond to the way they feel the world works. A great example of this phenomenon happened only a couple of days ago.

My lovely bride Marketa and I were sitting on our patio and our two dogs (not really dogs; they are Shih Tzus) were out running around. We always have a bowl of water ready for them. The youngest came up for a drink, looked at the bowl, turned away and then looked at Marketa. I was promptly informed the bowl was not in its correct location; I had placed it on the west side of the column, but it goes on the south side.

Once I corrected my stupid mistake, the dog immediately consumed the water she needed and let me know (via all signals possible) that she was glad I'd realized my ridiculous error in judgment.

That incident represents the Pavlovian theory at work in our everyday lives. We've all studied the works of Ivan Pavlov at some point in our schooling. He was the Russian physiologist who during the 1890s created the environment of classical conditioning: "Behavior analysis in which an innate response to a potent biological stimulus becomes expressed in response to a previously neutral stimulus."

Hence, a dog and a bell.

Just like our "patio incident," each of us witnesses great examples of the Pavlovian theory nearly every day. It might be when we're in line at a checkout, dealing with all of the ridiculousness of airport security and overall travel today, or enduring the normal process of visits to QSRs or fast-casual eateries. We are exposed to Pavlovian behavior on a regular basis.

Service Without a Smile

We've all heard about the decline of McDonald's same-store sales and the actions the company is taking to correct its path and re-establish dominance. The ideas about how to do that are all over the board. However, in my opinion, the company's most stupid decisions involve changes to Happy Meals and the introduction of a kale salad. Are you kidding me? A kale salad at McDonald's? You can't even get a kale salad at Panera or Zoe's. Come on.

The problem is not the menu items—the problem is the deteriorating customer experience. What used to be America's stopping place during travels is now America's avoidance place. Clean it up! Spruce it up! Hire individuals who can properly interact and who appear to at least somewhat care. But don't offer me a kale salad.

Another example: Our golf course's clubhouse recently underwent a major renovation. It was definitely needed and is very much appreciated. However, the "new digs" will not mean anything if the club doesn't improve its core operational standards. As I said to the new general manager, "Yes, the environment/atmosphere is a major part of the overall member experience that must be addressed. However, the quality of food and service must also be equally addressed. The club has successfully trained the members as Pavlov's dogs to not come to the club if you are expecting a fully balanced experience."

Don't offer me a
KALE SALAD.

Our golf course is as good as any in Houston. However, as long as the members remain dogs listening for the bell, the clubhouse experience is going to remain dismal.

Hungry Like the Woof

Last Saturday, I was shopping at "my local H-E-B supermarket" (tagline of the company). I went to produce, and the routine items were just ... not there. Where in the heck are the broccoli, cauliflower, asparagus and Jazz apples? Well, guess what happened? The store pulled the old "let's do a new store set." Lo and behold, those of us shopping the produce department became aware of others items for purchase. The bottom line: Renewed awareness and disrupted behaviors result in increased sales. The same holds true for our stores—they must be refreshed and renewed on an ongoing basis.

In a final (perfect) example of Pavlov's theory, we assisted one of our longtime clients in the creation of a new facility, including a great 3,500-square-foot store and fuel forecourt in a small, rural community. It replaced a 25-year-old kiosk site. This location had been one of the primary fuel destinations in the town; however, it has not been a store/food destination.

Its role within the community is now significantly changed, yet the residents and patrons do not realize this expanded role. They continue to visit the location for their fuel needs, but they go to another store they have supported for nearly as many years for other items. It remains a challenge for our client to change how it is viewed in its role within the community. Our client hopes those well-trained customers will stop responding to the ringing tones of the old bell and will establish new behavior patterns. It's a tough challenge, but I'm confident they'll succeed.

Who says old dogs can't learn new tricks? Of course we can. We just must stop listening to the ringing of the same old bells. This old dog realizes this fact nearly every day.

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