



## SERVICE WITH A SMILE (2.0) How the Atlanta Hawks Answered a Challenge to Reach Service Greatness

BY JASON PARKER, VICE PRESIDENT, CUSTOMER SERVICE AND OPERATIONS FOR ATLANTA HAWKS BASKETBALL CLUB AND PHILIPS ARENA, AND NIVI NAGIEL, NCSA

Last March, while the Atlanta Hawks Basketball Club was busy planning its \$192.5 million transformation of Philips Arena, Hawks CEO Steve Koonin jumped in the same elevator as Jason Parker, vice president of customer service and operations for the Hawks and Philips Arena. Wasting no time, Koonin threw a literal elevator pitch at Parker that went like this: “Jason, I think we’re good at service. But we really need to get to *great*. With everything we’re doing with the arena, everything we’re investing to make this team world-class, we need to figure out how to have our service be *great*” (as paraphrased by Parker). That moment

marked the inception of SMILE 2.0, Parker’s sweeping overhaul of the Hawks’ customer service approach.

In 2001, Parker was serving as the recruiting and training manager for the San Jose Sharks when his wife was checking hockey scores one day and stumbled on an ad for a director of customer service at Philips Arena. By the following January, Parker was working for the Atlanta Thrashers hockey team and the Hawks six months out of the year, and the Atlanta Braves for the other six months. With 20 years in the sports entertainment industry now under his belt, Parker can still attest that “every single day in an arena is a completely different dynamic.” And with 70 full-time arena operations staff and about 1,500 part-time event staff—diversely employed by third-party food/beverage, cleaning, and parking partner organizations, as well as by the Hawks and Philips Arena—serving 1.5–2 million

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guests at 140–170 events in an average year, every day is also an ongoing effort to create a unified service culture. “Because the guest doesn’t know who the operator of each segment of your business is,” said Parker. To the guest, anyone working the event represents either the Hawks or Philips Arena. “We want everyone reading from the same hymnal.”

**“Event-goers are not customers, or fans—they are guests.”**

That hymnal has its roots in a customer service program developed by an NBA–Disney Institute partnership called Elevate. Elevate was the NBA’s answer to their biggest competition: home and mobile viewing devices. With fans able to watch what they want, when they want, where they want, and often with better viewing quality than they would get at the arena, the NBA recognized a need to enhance the game-day arena experience—one that goes beyond just seeing the event. That’s when the NBA partnered with the Disney Institute, which began with training of NBA fan-experience leaders on Disney service strategies, and eventually led to the collaborative Elevate program.



“When we began to roll out Elevate here [in Atlanta],” said Parker, “we really wanted to ensure that it was aligned with who we are, culturally. So we took Elevate, and converted it to SMILE—our own home-grown program.” It all starts with

**Southern Hospitality**—a mentality that Atlantans take great pride in. For the Hawks, this means that event-goers are not customers, or fans—they are guests—arena staff are hosts, and all are welcome.

**Make a Moment**—“When you consume media at your house, moments are just that; you’re consuming them at that time and then, for the most part, they’re gone. Here,” said Parker, “we have the ability to make a moment that will be an anchor memory.” The Hawks want to make sure each team member knows they are responsible for making moments that will last a lifetime.

**Individuals Matter**—Each guest is important to the organization, and should be made to feel that way; not just “seat-holder number 8,472 coming through the door, you nod at me, scan my ticket and that’s that,” in Parker’s words. “So we want to make sure that our relationship with each guest as they come in is *engaging*.”

**Loyalty**—“Loyalty to our organization, to our brand, and to our guests.”

**Empowerment**—“For all of our staff, the focus is making moments; it’s Southern Hospitality,” said Parker. “So they’re empowered to remove the barriers to our guests’ being able to fully enjoy the experience.”

In short, SMILE is all about making operations as customer-centric as possible, rather than focused on the bottom line. “And the way you bring people into it,” said Parker, “is you treat your staff the same way you want them to treat our guests. And we want to make sure the messaging is consistent across every single department, whether they’re an internal or an external partner.” From recognition and appreciation programs to year-end bonuses, all staff working at Philips Arena are treated the same, whoever signs their paycheck. “We don’t want anyone to feel apart from; we want everyone to feel a part of.”

So the Hawks leadership had custom-tailored this well-developed NBA-Disney program, and SMILE was

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launched, and yet, not much changed. “We made a lot of neat posters, and we had a lot of nice cards, and we had balloons, and we identified people as members of the SMILE Squad, and we ran training for all full-time and part-time staff, and then, we all went back to our jobs. SMILE didn’t really go beyond that culturally. It lacked being front and center,” said Parker. “If you really don’t shift your culture around a concept, then it’s just something that lives as a slogan.”

Fast forward to that elevator ride that Koonin and Parker fortuitously shared. “Rather than just throw that away as *Yet again, the boss is saying do a little bit better*, I thought, *OK, let’s pretend it’s blank slate. What can I do to make it better?*” recounted Parker. He had some ideas, but he spent the following week getting feedback from other staff on what they thought some of the barriers were to great service. A few things emerged as priorities:

**1. Employees were being compensated in comparable industries in market.** “It’s hard to be great if at the very start of the process, you’re compensating people where they can go somewhere else and get better pay, even if it isn’t a better environment to work in. So we knew we had to be competitive financially. If I wasn’t pricing myself right in the marketplace, I couldn’t get the right candidate pool,” explained Parker.

**2. The second priority was identifying and enticing ideal candidates.** Parker looked at who their highest performers were, and asked, “How do we reach this group? Why are they here and what brings them back year after year?” He found that the staff who performed best were those who had been referred by others already working there. “It was blatantly obvious once we took the time to take a look at it,” said Parker.

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**3. Operations staff are focused on process, and hence, very good at tasks.** But “we didn’t stop to think about the *why*,” said Parker. “I took from Steve [Koonin]’s statement not just *What do we need to do task-wise?* but *What’s the why behind what we’re doing?* Why do people come to events? Why are we here as staff? That led me to, *What’s our purpose?*” And the answer was: “We want to let people have a fun time in a safe place. That’s really it.” The staff’s ultimate responsibilities, in other words, boil down to ensuring the arena is a safe, clean place, and the

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The S.M.I.L.E. Squad surprises the Human Resources team with goodies.

guests have a fun time. While the operations staff can't be responsible for wins on the court or quality of the performances, what they can do is remove the barriers preventing guests from having a fun time.

And with these questions, everything started to change. Right down to position names. Ticket-takers became entrance hosts; ushers were transformed into section hosts. All roles were renamed to reflect this paradigm shift from a task-oriented to a *why*-oriented mentality. SMILE 2.0 changed every aspect of the employee life cycle: from how candidates are recruited, screened, and selected, to how team members are paid, onboarded, and trained, and how supervisors coach, evaluate, and provide feedback.

For example, "When I looked at how we onboard people," said Parker, "in the past it was: Here's a website, come find us, fill out the application online, and that's it. This is not the best way to do it. Instead, let's start by asking: What's the promise we're making to employees? Let's come up with an employee value proposition. Then when we built our recruiting, we said: Let's leverage all of our assets. Let's take advantage of the social media power of the Atlanta Hawks, and the social networking power of everybody who works here. So we charged every full- and part-time

employee to be a SMILE talent scout." All staff were equipped with business cards, and offered a \$100 signing bonus. "We changed the whole dynamic," said Parker.

As for screening, "The way we screened in the past was: Someone would call you, and then there'd be two face-to-face meetings. You'd be making the decision based on that screening, a background check, and an off-the-shelf personality index tool. So we said, Let's be smarter about this." Together with a professional staffing company, the Hawks designed a new infrastructure to screen, select, and onboard staff. Now, after a candidate has applied, they are provided with two links.

One takes them to a personality index product that on the back end is built on the personalities of the Hawks' highest performers, and allows recruiters to compare candidates' answers to those of model performers. "That helps inform our decision-making: Do they have that service orientation that's aligned with our culture already?" per Parker. The second link is to VidCruiter, where candidates are asked pre-recorded questions by Dominique Wilkins and they record and submit a video selfie of their responses. With the process now entirely electronic, face-to-face interview time is substantially reduced, and "we also start out with really incredible candidates," said Parker.

The new training program was designed to mirror NBA culture, including "Training Camps" to develop "Hall-of-Fame players," and "Coaches Clinics" for training supervisors and leadership. In Training Camp for new hires, the first two sessions focus not on tasks, but on the *why*: "Why you're here; why we're here; what

***"We didn't stop to think about the why."***

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we’re trying to do; what are our goals and objectives,” explained Parker. “I don’t get into tasks until the third session. Because if I start with tasks, then they focus on the tasks, and everything else is like listening to Charlie Brown’s teachers. So we start with the why’s.” All current employees go through the new training as well, from frontline game-day staff to full-time Hawks and Philips Arena team members—“Because we provide services to one another, we are each other’s clients,” affirmed Parker.

Coaching, feedback, and standards of evaluation shifted in line with the SMILE 2.0 philosophy as well. Performance is now assessed based not just on task completion, but more on how staff are engaging with guests—are they making them feel welcome; are they behaving as a host?

An all-encompassing service model transformation does not come without its challenges, of course. “In implementing this, people understood what I was saying about focusing on the *why*; the challenge was understanding how much work it takes. You can’t spin 180 degrees on a dime. It takes a while to course-correct.” And there was a lot of work to do in about two months’ time, both internally and with partner organizations. But “the executives have been incredibly supportive,” said Parker. And to familiarize the staff with the many changes in the new arena—new personnel, new spaces, new processes, etc.—the Hawks planned a SMILE Squad Challenge Pep Rally. Following a dinner featuring their newest food offerings, the high-energy event was kicked off by the arena general manager, followed by actress Jami Gertz (one of the Hawks owners), and an inspiring talk on diver-

sity by one of the team members. Then staff embarked on an arena-wide scavenger hunt, meeting executives and seeing every new experience that guests would be enjoying. The evening was topped off with \$3,000 worth of Hawks swag awarded as prizes. “It was a blast,” said Parker. Course correcting may take time, but it can still be fun.

As any successful service program must be, SMILE 2.0 is an ongoing, constantly evolving process. As staff interact with customers in a new way, new opportunities for improvement present themselves. In response to feedback that emerged in SMILE meetings, for example, a nursing-mother room and a quiet room for people with sensory challenges are being added to the arena. Listening to staff, managers, and frontline team members and collecting anecdotal feedback, rather than just data, is key to staying ahead of the game. “You don’t run into the issues until you have conversations with staff about the experiences they’re having with guests,” said Parker.

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The outcome of the organization’s efforts has yet to be determined. For now, “I don’t anticipate seeing anything other than incremental change, at most,” said Parker. “Everything I’m doing now is preparing for next year. This is for us to learn who of our staff can truly embrace the concept of working for the *why* rather than the task and are best aligned with being here.” If consistency, inclusiveness, and a genuine commitment to service excellence are any indication, though, the Hawks seem well on their way to *great*. ■

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