Interview Transcripts

# Interview with Colin (Pseudonym)

INTERVIEWER: Today is March 31, 2015. It's 12:07 p.m., and I'm speaking with Colin. Thank you for taking the time to talk to me. First, can you tell me a little bit about your employer? What line of business were they in? What kind of goods or services did they offer their customers or patrons?

COLIN: So I worked for a movie theatre, for a little bit over five years, split up of course. It was [Company A]. We sold popcorn, drinks, candy. We sold movie tickets. We even had a restaurant attached to it that sold burgers and anything in between.

INTERVIEWER: To the best of your knowledge, how big was your employer, based on the number of people that they employed at your specific location?

COLIN: There were probably about forty other employees. It was a pretty big movie theatre. We had seven assistant managers and then, of course, the general manager.

INTERVIEWER: And then the forty includes everyone else that worked there?

COLIN: Yeah, any janitor, cleaner, box office worker, concessions, restaurant worker.

INTERVIEWER: Did they have any other locations as well, besides the one that you worked at?

COLIN: [Company A] has movie theatres throughout America, but the general manager just oversaw the actual movie theatre.

INTERVIEWER: What was your specific role with the company? What sort of work did you do, what were your responsibilities?

COLIN: So, it started off as just cleaning, but slowly as I kept working there I moved up to concessions, to box office, I even helped with moving projectors, and then worked with the restaurant maybe the last six months. So I learned pretty much everything but the management.

INTERVIEWER: What percentage of your time would you say you were working with patrons or customers?

COLIN: Probably, except for when we were cleaning theatres, maybe eighty-five percent of the time.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember if your movie theatre had any major policies that they publicly promoted in their advertising related to customer service? Was that something that they advertised?

COLIN: I mean, I don't know if it was clearly advertised, but we always talked about customer service first. It was always a statement that our managers told us continually, but I don't know if it was publicly announced that customer service first.

INTERVIEWER: So, for example, some stores have big signs out front that say things like "100% satisfaction guarantee." Was that the type of thing that you recall them having?

COLIN: No. no.

INTERVIEWER: So, even though if they didn't necessarily have some, an advertised public policy, in your own words, what were the official policies of the theatre regarding customer service to the best of your knowledge?

COLIN: The official policy would be, "Clean, efficient, fun, movie theatre experience for every guest." Or customer. We called them "guests" because that was just what they told us to call them instead of "customers." But yeah, no. Clean, fast, easy, fun.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any policies specifically on how you should interact with customers—or guests, in your case?

COLIN: Very cordially, of course. One of the things in training was always be the first to apologize if anything goes wrong. Never blame the guest—or customer—be concise and clear with them about what they have to offer.

INTERVIEWER: In your view, did your employer's official policies on customer service align with their actual practice in terms of customer service?

COLIN: That's a good question. Probably, for the most part, no. I think, for the most part, we were true in word, but when it came to application, I'd guess only about forty percent of the employees or managers actually took that part of the policy serious.

INTERVIEWER: Can you give me any specific examples of a time when your employer—not you, personally—but when a member of management clearly behaved in a way that did or did not meet a policy?

COLIN: Let me think. Well, one of our big things that our movie theatre had that we were trying really hard to push was "Clean movie theatres for everyone." And there were some assistant managers—I won't name them—that didn't mind garbage on the ground and came in, went up and down, cleaned the big stuff and left lots of the little stuff, and just that stigma of if the assistant managers don't care, it slowly turned into the employees realizing that we didn't care about cleanliness. And it was a big issue for awhile of assistant managers just not caring about cleanliness, even though they were constantly telling us to be clean and to be efficient in cleaning.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember any times when there was an interaction directly between an employee and a customer that did or didn't comply with the things you were saying earlier about courtesy, and being the first to apologize, and some of those policies you talked about?

COLIN: That's a good question. I don't know if I ever saw it. It was very . . . Even the assistant managers that were complacent in other areas, as soon as they were in front of a guest, they were extremely cordial. So I don't know if I saw any of the non-cordialness between managers or assistant managers to guests. It was more the behind the scenes where the lacking occurred.

INTERVIEWER: And would you consider cleanliness a type of customer service?

COLIN: Absolutely. Absolutely.

INTERVIEWER: Did your employer have any other policies that sometimes conflicted with, created tensions with, or made it hard to comply with their policies regarding customer service?

COLIN: Well, that's a really good question. They pushed us very much that we needed to sell large popcorn, large drinks with every single transaction, but then they said, "Don't push merchandise." And there was times that a child would come and order a small drink, and I remember getting, not scolded necessarily, but told I should have tried to get them to buy candy or popcorn. But I was trying to be polite and kind to the fact that this is a child with only four dollars, and they're getting a four dollar small drink. So, sometimes there was conflicting in the sense that they wanted us to push sales, but they also didn't want us to push and be impolite to guests, so I think sometimes those two kind of conflicted.

INTERVIEWER: How did you handle that situation, with the child?

COLIN: Well, with the child pretty much all I did was I got them the small drink. It was more of the assistant manager who was near when I was getting the drink for him said, "Is that all you sold?" And when I explained it, they still said, "Well, you should have pushed the sales." And of course, as an employee I saw, "Oh, I'm sorry. I'll work on that," even though that manager didn't always direct sale anyway too. It was kind of weird.

INTERVIEWER: Can you think of any other policies or situations where one policy made it difficult for you to follow the customer service policies? Or to provide what you would say is good customer service?

COLIN: Not that comes to mind.

INTERVIEWER: In general, at that particular job, how did you personally approach customer service? In terms of policies and what you actually did, what were your mind-set and actions in terms of customer service?

COLIN: Sure. I am very adamant on customer service. Cleanliness is a big thing. I mean, they trained us on all these things, but even my own values and practices kind of seep through. I was always very apologetic. I like to keep the policies, and even though there were managers that had conflicting thoughts, I tried hard to be accommodating to whoever was supervising me.

INTERVIEWER: Was there ever a time when you were unable to give a customer something they wanted or meet a request of theirs because it conflicted with a policy? A time where somebody wanted something and you were not able to provide that?

COLIN: Absolutely. Absolutely. So, our drinks specifically were nonrefillable, and there were many guests who came back and said, "Can I have a refill?" or, "Oops. I spilled this drink. Could I get a refill?," and because of policy we can't. Because that's just what they tell us to do. We can't give refills on drinks, even if they spill them.

INTERVIEWER: Can you think of any specific examples of a time where somebody came back and said that, and how you responded?

COLIN: Sure. What comes to mind, actually, was it was a group of teenage girls, and they had bought a large drink and a large popcorn—and large popcorns get refills, but not drinks—and right after ordering it, almost three feet away, the girl dropped her drink, and it went scattering. And they came up, and they were like, "Oh my goodness. Can I get a refill?" Because of policy, I had to say, "Unfortunately, we don't do refills. I could sell you another drink." And they were a little discouraged because they were rethinking about the drink on the ground, and they felt like it was an accident. They luckily didn't push anything too much. I think they got a medium drink after that, but they were a little discouraged by the fact that I couldn't just refill their spilled drink.

INTERVIEWER: Any other times? Any other situations where somebody asked way beyond that? Where a customer was more dissatisfied by that?

COLIN: I mean, it was a policy that lots of employees had issues with because it wasn't consistent. Some employees let them have it, and so there was one time when—not with me, but the person next to me—where he came back for a refill, and he made this big fuss about how, "The last time I was here, I had refills. This is garbage. Let me talk to your assistant manager." And we went and got the manager, and the manager explained and apologized, saying they couldn't give them a refill. But it never got violent. It was just very loud noises. It was very disgruntled kind of yelling.

INTERVIEWER: How did the customer feel at the end of the situation, do you think? What did they express?

COLIN: That's a good question. I do not know the ending of that story. All I know is that they didn't get what they wanted, and they made a big fuss, and then they went back to the theatre. That's all I've heard. They might have done more afterwards, but . . .

INTERVIEWER: In general, do you have any thoughts on how you personally might have navigated any differences between a customer's expectation—what they wanted—and the policies? What were some of your thoughts on that topic?

COLIN: Well, that's tough because they advertise customer service first, but then some of the policies are more on the business side and less on the customer's side. So how I, I always try to be cordial. I always try to approach the circumstances, try to do everything I possibly could, based on the policies, but due to the fact that I am employed and getting paid by them, I made sure to keep the policies of selling, and not giving refills, and making sure that you're checking ID for seventeen and younger, and so forth.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think about policies like that? For example, the girls who spilled their drink in front of you, and it was clear they spilled it and didn't drink it. How do you think if you were the employer, if you were the person making the decision, how would you have handled that?

COLIN: That's a good question. I would first have to analyze the situation. I'd have to see how many people are around because, like, if there were lots of people around and you gave out a free refill, even though it went against your policy normally, other people might use that excuse to get more drinks, which I could see on the business end not being good. But, in their scenario, where nobody was around, I don't think it would have taken that much just to refill them, or even get a new cup and just not charge them, considering it was an accident. It was a clear accident. You saw it happen, and, you know, things like that happen.

INTERVIEWER: Was there ever a time you can recall where someone has come back to you and said, "Look, your policy says 'customer first,' and I don't feel that that's happening here?"

COLIN: No. I never had that scenario.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, great. My last question is: are there any other thoughts on customer service in retail that you would share in anecdotes or just thoughts that you might have on the subject of customer service from the perspective of an employee?

COLIN: From that of an employee's, specifically of a movie theatre, it was hard, particularly towards the end. What disgruntled me as an employee the most was the fact that we were selling and trying . . . not to take advantage of guests—but getting money from them and charging really expensive—the business side—but also trying to be accommodating and the face of customer service. You might gripe about a guest, but as soon as a guest is there we put on this facade that things are good. It just seems kind of two faced and kind of cheesy. I understand why it happens, but it's just unfortunate that that has to be the case, that we have to play two fronts, that of a business making money and ripping people off, and then also making sure they are happy and that they are coming back for more.

INTERVIEWER: Any thoughts on what you would do? If you could make any changes that you wanted, how might you approach that?

COLIN: Just be a little bit more forthright. I think just some of the backwardness behind the scenes isn't really appropriate, and I think it's . . . Not many people know about it unless they've done customer service, and so I think being forthright about it is something that the public wants, in fact.

INTERVIEWER: Any other thoughts?

COLIN: No.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it.