

The Power of Moments: Why Certain Experiences Have Extraordinary Impact

Second, we want to show you how you can create defining moments by making use of those elements. Why would you want to create them? To enrich your life. To connect with others. To make memories. To improve the experience of customers or patients or employees.

That's because research has found that in recalling an experience, we ignore most of what happened and focus instead on a few particular moments.

When people assess an experience, they tend to forget or ignore its length—a phenomenon called “duration neglect.” Instead, they seem to rate the experience based on two key moments: (1) the best or worst moment, known as the “peak”; and (2) the ending. Psychologists call it the “peak-end rule.”

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This research explains why, in reflecting on your Disney experience, you'll remember Space Mountain (the peak) and the mouse ears (the end). Everything else will tend to fade.

On longer time frames, peaks continue to matter but the relative importance of “endings” fades somewhat.

We're not very good at investing in such moments. For example, a teacher plans his history curriculum for a semester, but every class period gets roughly the same amount of attention. There's no attempt to shape a few “peak” moments. Or an executive leads her company through a fast-growth period, but there's little to distinguish one week from the next. Or we spend weekend after weekend together with our kids, but in memory all those times blend together

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For the sake of this book, a defining moment is a short experience that is both memorable and meaningful.

In our research, we have found that defining moments are created from one or more of the following four elements:

ELEVATION: Defining moments rise above the everyday.

INSIGHT: Defining moments rewire our understanding of ourselves or the world. In a few seconds or minutes, we realize something that might influence our lives for decades: Now is the time for me to start this business. Or, This is the person I'm going to marry.

PRIDE: Defining moments capture us at our best—moments of achievement, moments of courage.

CONNECTION: Defining moments are social: weddings, graduations, baptisms, vacations, work triumphs, bar and bat mitzvahs, speeches, sporting events. These moments are strengthened because we share them with others.

Defining moments often spark positive emotion—we'll use "positive defining moments" and "peaks" interchangeably throughout the book

Some powerful defining moments contain all four elements. Think of YES Prep's Senior Signing Day: the ELEVATION of students having their moment onstage, the INSIGHT of a sixth grader thinking That could be me, the PRIDE of being accepted to college, and the CONNECTION of sharing the day with an arena full of thousands of supportive people. (See the footnote for a mnemonic to remember this framework for defining moments.)

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The lack of attention paid to an employee's first day is mind-boggling. What a wasted opportunity to make a new team member feel included and appreciated.

To avoid this kind of oversight, we must understand when special moments are needed. We must learn to think in moments, to spot the occasions that are worthy of investment.

This is what we mean by "thinking in moments": to recognize where the prose of life needs punctuation.

We'll explore three situations that deserve punctuation: transitions, milestones, and pits. Transitions are classic occasions for defining moments

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John Deere's First Day Experience is a peak moment delivered at a time of transition. When a life transition lacks a "moment," though, it can become formless. We often feel anxious because we don't know how to act or what rules to apply.

Milkman realized that if her "fresh start" theory was right, then the slate-cleaning effect shouldn't be confined to New Year's Day. It should also be true for other

landmark dates that would give us an excuse to reset our record, such as the start of a new month or even a new week.

So “fresh starts” happen not only on New Year’s Day, but also on any other landmark date. If you’re struggling to make a transition, create a defining moment that draws a dividing line between Old You and New You.

Almost 25% of the positive encounters cited by customers were actually employees’ responses to service failures: slow service, mistaken orders, lost reservations, delayed flights, and so on. When employees handled these situations well, they transformed a negative moment to a positive one.

Every great service company is a master of service recovery.

Business leaders who can spot their customers’ moments of dissatisfaction and vulnerability—and take decisive action to support those customers—will have no trouble differentiating themselves from competitors. Offering to help someone in a difficult time is its own goal and reward. It also has the side effect of being good for business.

Transitions should be marked, milestones commemorated, and pits filled.

That’s the essence of thinking in moments.

For most of the types of moments in this book—moments of elevation and connection and pride—almost any time is a good time. The more you can multiply them, the better. The point we’re emphasizing here is that certain circumstances demand attention. And particularly in organizations, these circumstances tend to go unnoticed, as with the neglected

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The end of projects: In most organizations, the end of a project is commemorated by the immediate start of a new one. But it’s useful to provide closure. For inspiration, consider that Steve Jobs once held a mock funeral onstage for the death of Mac Operating System 9: “Mac OS 9 was a friend to us all.

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How do we create defining moments?

Moments of elevation are experiences that rise above the everyday. Times to be savored. Moments that make us feel engaged, joyful, amazed, motivated. They are peaks.

Moments of elevation can be social occasions that mark transitions:

Then there are other moments of elevation where we feel elevated by virtue of being “onstage,” so to speak: competing at sporting events, giving a presentation, performing in a play. The stakes are higher. We’re absorbed in the moment.

Finally, there are moments of elevation that happen spontaneously: The unplanned road trip. The walk on a sunny day that leaves you smiling. The first touch of a lover’s hand.

But while elevated moments are simple to conceive, they can be maddeningly hard to bring to life.

Recall the mantra about great service experiences from the first chapter: “Mostly forgettable and occasionally remarkable.” That mantra applies to school experience (and life experience) as well. The “occasionally remarkable” moments shouldn’t be left to chance!

In other words, “mostly forgettable” is actually a desirable state in many businesses! It means nothing went wrong. You got what you expected.

First, you fill the pits. That, in turn, frees you up to focus on the second stage: creating the moments that will make the experience “occasionally remarkable.” Fill pits, then build peaks.

“Studies have consistently shown that reliability, dependability, and competence meet customer expectations,” said service expert Leonard Berry, a professor at Texas A&M University. “To exceed customer expectations and create a memorable experience, you need the behavioral and interpersonal parts of the service. You need the element of pleasant surprise. And that comes when human beings interact.” Here’s the surprise, though: Most service executives are ignoring the research about meeting versus exceeding expectations.