



A Lesson in Customer Service

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This year we went to opening night for the Durham Bulls. I usually buy one of their mini plans and we go to at least nine games—plus whatever other games we attend with folks from the School. Many years ago our first house was within easy walking distance of historic Durham Athletic Park. We sat in the bleachers for lots of games—and we even went late at night to be a part of the crowd scenes for the movie *Bull Durham*. You can see me for about a nanosecond if you freeze the movie and know exactly where to look—or at least a blurry person that I'm pretty sure is me. In



other words, we are long-time, loyal fans of the Bulls.

During this past off-season [the Bulls invested \\$20 million in ballpark improvements](#). The lights were upgraded and the grass was replaced—and all of the seats are new. There is a large video board on the Blue Monster wall in left field, and several smaller video boards throughout the park. The sound system and lighting have been upgraded, and there are 20 new concession stands. According to the General Manager, Mike Birling, “The focal point has been the whole experience for our fans,” he said. “New concession stands, new equipment, new kitchen, that kind of stuff. That’s the mode we’re in, making sure we can take care of 10,000 (nightly) beginning next week.”



Scene from Bull Durham

Given all of the advance publicity about the improvements, it was doubly frustrating when they were not ready to handle the crowds. The lines at the concession stands were long, but the real problem was how slowly they moved. I probably missed at least three innings of the game while standing in various lines for food and beer. One woman asked for a pretzel and was told that all of them were still frozen. Another worker at a different stand blurted out that they just “were not ready for all of these people.” The reflections from the new electronic “ribbon board” that runs along the outfield wall from center field to right made it difficult to read the manually operated scoreboard. We had been before on opening night and had a great time. This year we talked about how bad things seemed, and so did the people around us.

I left hoping that they would get their act together before our next game. The following day I got this email from the General Manager for the Bulls.



Triple-A Affiliate of the Tampa Bay Rays



Dear Bulls Fans:

"We are very grateful and we know that we only succeed when customers choose us. We know that we must continue to earn that choice."

JK Shin, President/CEO of Samsung Electronics, said that a month ago and it stuck with me. I never expected to be using that quote in a letter like this. You chose us last night and we didn't earn that choice.

I will guarantee we will earn that choice the next time you are gracious enough to choose us. It would be very easy to go into many, many facts as to why and how things turned out poorly at last night's game in some of the major areas of our operation, but in my opinion those would come off as excuses and I am not making any.

When we embarked on this massive renovation of the DBAP it was done with trying to create a fan experience that is unmatched. I still firmly believe we will do that. Will that be next week or the week after when everything is completely finished I am not sure, but it will happen. I believe in our track record and how much the Bulls care about our fans and the community.

Starting on Monday, April 7 and running through Sunday, April 13 please call 919-956-BULL and mention the code **Opening Day** for any Monday – Thursday game the rest of the season. You will be able to order as many tickets as you purchased for yesterday's game. In addition there will be \$5.00 loaded on to each one of the tickets for you to use for concessions.

We are grateful for all Bulls fans and we will strive to be your choice. If you would like to discuss further, please email us at info@durhambulls.com.

Sincerely,

Mike Birling
General Manager
Durham Bulls

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919.687.6500 Fax:919.687.6560 Tickets:919.956.BULL
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Now I'm an even more committed fan of the Bulls. Great customer service is one of my pet peeves. You need to do three things if your service falls short of expectations—admit it, apologize, and fix it.

Customers deserve great service, and poor service should never be compounded with excuses. I love that the General Manager refuses to list the reasons for the things that went wrong because “in my opinion those would come off as excuses and I am not making any.” As a customer, I don't care why things went wrong. After a disappointing fan experience, I shouldn't also have to be burdened with his management problems. The General Manager also avoids the increasingly common conditional apology—“I'm sorry, but” The key is to accept responsibility by apologizing—end of story, period. You deny responsibility the minute you start offering excuses.

The School is in the business of serving North Carolina public officials. There are countless examples of staff and faculty going out of their way to meet the special needs of individual officials who are attending our courses. The culture of the School encourages responsiveness and the consistent feedback from officials is that we do a great job. When something goes wrong, however, the Durham Bulls have provided us with a great example of how to respond. Admit it, apologize, and fix it. No excuses. If we need to refund someone's money to make it right, I have no problem doing it—even in tough financial times. It is the right thing to do and it will create even stronger loyalty from our clients. I'm more committed to the Bulls than ever and I can't wait for the next game.



