



The golden age: service management on transatlantic ocean liners

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper seeks to explore lessons in service delivery from an industry that no longer exists. The transatlantic passenger liner dramatizes some of the most unique challenges of service delivery. The ship itself was a delivery mechanism completely separated from support services. Customers were essentially contained for extended periods. Whereas all customers received the same core transportation service, peripheral services varied substantially by service class.

Design/methodology/approach – Description of the historical context is followed by examinations of passenger and service provider perspectives to illustrate services expected and delivered. Primary and secondary source material is used to exemplify service management challenges.

Findings – Socioeconomic and technological factors played major roles in delivery system design decisions. With stable and loyal workforces and well designed delivery systems, ocean liners were able to deliver service successfully to customer classes with widely varying expectations.

Practical implications – Service management on ocean liners occupied a range of levels and intensity not found in current organizational contexts. The context provides modern practitioners pure consideration of complexities and service management implications.

Originality/value – The novel and isolated organizational aspects of transatlantic ocean liners is unique among organizations. Examination of service management in this context provides information of original value not available from examination of other kinds of organizations.

Keywords Liners, Service delivery, Customer satisfaction, Travel

Paper type Research paper

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As organizations in service industries compete to survive and thrive, the ability to design and operate a delivery system that provides high-quality encounters with customers is a distinct competitive advantage. Quality encounters enhance customer loyalty, promote repeat business, enhance the company's reputation, and add to the bottom line (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990). Though the formal study of service management is mere decades old, classic examples of extraordinary service delivery exist that reflect contemporary service management ideals.

We explore the challenges of service management in the historical context of passenger service on steamships crossing the ocean during the "golden age" of transatlantic travel. This golden age began in 1907 with the launchings of the *Lusitania* and *Mauretania*. It ended in 1958 with the advent of scheduled transatlantic passenger jet flights. The half-century of history is an exceptional context in which to

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analyze the intricacies of service management. The uncommon richness of available onboard services allows consideration of multiple aspects of providers and customers. Successful transatlantic ocean liner companies were committed to delivering complex bundles of services to clientele from widely varying social strata. Their service missions were carried out in large but effectively closed systems (i.e. the actual ships) that were also carrying out their own missions across the Atlantic Ocean. The organizational environment was characterized by dynamic weather patterns, economic and social upheavals, technological advances, and governmental regulations, making for compounded service management challenges.

Seagoing steamships have played major roles in passenger transportation throughout the world. However, during the targeted historical period, the North Atlantic trade was state of the art. We thus focus our undertaking on managing service delivery on those transatlantic liners traveling between Western Europe and the USA. This era of transatlantic travel, especially during the interwar years, offers a compelling glimpse of sophisticated service management amidst tremendous cultural and social change. Moving the equivalent of a “small city” across 3,000 miles of volatile ocean, in complete separation from support systems, was a considerable undertaking. Though the basic service objective was moving people across the sea, significant service challenges resulted from evolving customer needs related to comfort, dining, hygiene, entertainment, speed, and safety. From a management perspective, how did service providers meet these challenges?

Our undertaking includes four major sections. The first, “Historical background: steamships and the Atlantic,” describes the transatlantic ocean liner companies and industry stages. The second, “Passenger needs, luxuries, and classes of service,” describes ocean liner patrons and services available to them. Sub-sections correspond to classes of service on the ocean liners (steerage, tourist third, second, and first). The third, “Onboard: service providers and delivery,” undertakes another historical iteration from a service provider’s perspective. That section explains how service management was executed via onboard divisions, staffing, specialized services, career advancement, emergent control systems, and is illustrated with case data. Finally, we digest historical lessons and implications for modern service management.

Historical background: steamships and the Atlantic

Transatlantic travel was long, arduous, and hazardous for centuries. Not until the mid-1800s did the advent of steamships offer a means of a safer, more secure crossing. Regular 12-day steamship service between England and the USA began in the 1840s with the awarding of a mail contract to Samuel Cunard. Not regarded as very comfortable, early steamships had two primary advantages over sailing packets: speed and reliability (Lacey, 1973). The Cunard Line quickly dominated the market of wealthy patrons who valued those attributes. However, competition soon arrived from the Collins line. Edward Collins believed the luxury and speed of Mississippi river boats could be duplicated on the Atlantic, thus attracting the most wealthy and reliable travelers. Collins liners were faster than Cunard Liners, able to cross the Atlantic in under ten days. They also introduced peripherals like steam heating, barbershops, ice rooms, separate smoking rooms, bathrooms, carpeting, and gourmet meals (Coleman, 1976). Unfortunately, state of the art shipbuilding and navigation had yet to match the speed of Collins liners. As such, they were notoriously prone to underway disasters.

The additional expenses of providing enhanced amenities to passengers combined with reduced demand due to shipwrecks and a withdrawal of subsidies from the USA brought about the demise of the Collins line in 1857 (Armstrong, 1957).

Another source of competition for Cunard shifted the customer base for transatlantic crossings. In the 1850s, William Inman inaugurated the first significant immigrant trade via steamship, thus creating a market that remained viable well into the twentieth century. Until then, steamships traditionally carried first class passengers and express cargo. Inman was one of the first to make wide use of the economical screw propeller as a technological advance over the paddle wheel (Coleman, 1976). His ships, though slower (14-day crossings) than Cunard's, carried immigrants in much healthier conditions than the three or four week sailing packets dominating the immigrant trade. Healthy passengers were desirable to ocean liner companies, as they resulted in fewer delays at quarantine upon arrival. Inman filled entire ships with immigrants, provided them all three meals per day, soap, towels, cutlery, and mattresses. Yet, he generated considerable profit levels.

Another significant transatlantic line emerged in the late 1800s. Formed by John Pilkington and H.T. Wilson in 1863 and purchased by T.H. Ismay in 1868 for North Atlantic service, the White Star Line created barriers to competition by raising the ante for new entrants in the industry. In addition to constructing the ill-fated *Titanic*, sunk in 1912 after colliding with an iceberg, the White Star Line incurred several ocean liner disasters (e.g. *Atlantic* in 1873; *Naronic* in 1893; *Republic* in 1909). Nonetheless, the White Star Line did contribute many industry advances and improved passenger comfort significantly via structural and design changes. New amenities and innovations included larger cabins, ship-width dining saloons, and first class passengers amidships (Coleman, 1976).

There was considerable profit to be made on the trade between England and USA near the end of the nineteenth century. Prosperity in both countries resulted in a market for business travel. New opportunities drove movement of the wealthy to and from Europe and increased westward immigrant traffic to the USA. By the mid-1890s, 80 percent of all passengers traveling in first and second class were traveling from, and returning to, the USA. The expectations for service held by these passengers set the stage for dramatic industry changes during the twentieth century. Maritime historians such as Brinnin and Gaulin (1988) divide the twentieth century liner industry into three distinct periods:

- (1) Floating Palaces (1890-1918);
- (2) Transatlantic Twenties (1919-1929); and
- (3) Atlantic Twilight (1930-1939).

The three periods are defined not only by separation in terms of worldwide conflicts but also by technological, social, economic, and political dynamics. We now illustrate how those environmental changes affected service management practices on ocean liners across history and how customer needs evolved commensurately.

Luxuries, classes of service, and passenger needs

Beginning with the advent of steam in the mid-1800s and lasting until the demise of the transatlantic trade in the early 1960s, millions of people crossed the Atlantic aboard ocean liners. The market was partitioned into distinct passenger types, members of

which were accustomed to unique social atmospheres, particular styles of accommodation, and varying modes of service. In what follows, we examine classes of service in terms of immigrants in steerage, third-class tourists, second-class, and first-class passenger types.

Immigrants in steerage

Though not as glamorous as the tuxedoed gentlemen and bejeweled women in other service classes, immigrants accounted for the largest number of passengers and the majority of revenues during the early twentieth century. For example, Hamburg-Amerika's *Imperator* carried 2,800 of its 4,100 (68 percent) capacity passenger load in steerage (Braynard, 1972). More than one million immigrants per year reached the USA by steamship between 1900 and 1914. Table I reports some passenger count breakdowns by class for various ocean lines.

American economic expansion after the Civil War and through the turn of the century, combined with famine and political upheaval in parts of Europe, resulted in significant westbound emigration (Miller, 1977). Though accommodations were austere for the immigrants, they traveled in the premier ships of each line. Thus, an irony of the early Atlantic trade was that, despite public attention to the luxuries of first class travel, immigrant-based profit built and sustained many of the transatlantic steamship companies. Although fares varied somewhat by company, by season (winter – less) by vessel (express steamers – more) by periodic rate competition and by price fixing efforts, average figures from 1910 to 1914 are illustrative. One-way rates from Europe to the USA were approximately \$95 in first class, \$65 in second class and \$35 in steerage (Hopkins, 1910). As an example, combining these fares with passenger landings for North German Lloyd at New York in 1913 (Table I), yields the following contributions of each passenger class to overall passenger revenue for that year: first class – \$1.74 million; second class – \$2.28 million; steerage – \$5.75 million. Though costs varied across classes, the highest single cost item was coal which was unaffected by the number of passengers in any class (Keeling, 1999). The real benefit of steerage passengers was reliability: they traveled during winter months when higher class passenger loadings traveled much less frequently. Classes of service varied widely. Each ship offered concurrent services of the highest class to wealthy passengers and of the lowest class to poor immigrants. Table II presents counts for all passenger capacity on selected ocean liners of the period based on Braynard (1972).

	First class	Second class	Steerage
North German Lloyd	18,348	35,091	164,233
Hamburg American	14,768	31,636	138,830
Red Star	3,071	16,625	70,051
French	5,218	20,987	65,013
Holland America	5,325	15,225	49,197
Cunard	15,080	24,469	85,291
White Star	14,589	24,879	58,631
All others	76,017	61,525	324,117
Total	152,416	230,437	955,363

Table I.
Passenger landings by
line at the Port of New
York (1913)

Immigrant passengers had simple service needs. The principal ones, aside from transportation, were basic hygiene maintenance activities (soap, showers, laundry) to allow them through quarantine at US ports of call. Hygiene services were provided to immigrants because quarantining represented an important business issue: any rejected immigrant had to be returned at company expense to the original departure port (Johnson *et al.*, 1935). By 1900, government regulations in the USA and England resulted in improved conditions such that immigrant passengers were provided meals, cleaning facilities, ventilation, and an individual berthing. Intense competition for steerage passengers in the early 1900s even resulted in offering medical care, accommodations during embarkation, transportation to departure ports, eating utensils, and straw mattresses. Such amenities were unheard of just a few years earlier.

By the 1900s, there was a growing tourist trade willing to venture abroad. About 50 years prior, the same spaces these tourists occupied had been used to ship cattle to Europe. One travel agent in Boston described the onboard conditions:

You will find in your bunk a large black tin cup, a deep soup plate, with "Cunard Line" stamped on its white surface, a knife, fork and large spoon, all of which you are expected to keep clean yourself. This will be your bill of fare: Beef soup or pea soup, with a scrap or two of meat in your plate, a tin of coffee, and plenty of very good bread and butter, breakfast, at eight o'clock; at eleven, your tin full of nice beef soup, plenty of beef, very good, but nearly always fresh, and potatoes; at supper, five o'clock, bread, butter and tea. On Friday you will have soup in the morning, but no meat, and fish at dinner; you will have pudding at Sunday's dinner and a little marmalade once or twice in the evening. You will find every thing scrupulously neat on board, and try to help that thing by keeping your bunk and your dishes neat. Keep a watch, too, of fellows who will try to steal your clean dishes and leave their dirty ones in place of yours; that is about the only kind of stealing you need fear (Brinnin, 1971, p. 292).

Despite the advertising, reality was not as glamorous. Passengers filed numerous reports of filthy and crowded conditions with US Government agencies (Brinnin, 1971). *The Scientific American Handbook of Travel* (1910) stated:

... steerage is not recommended for the use of tourists, and those who cannot afford accommodations in the second class should postpone their visit until such time as they can afford to travel comfortably (Hopkins, 1910, p. 50).

Although they were paying the bills, westbound steerage passengers were generally regarded as poor and morally inferior. Onboard interaction between classes was strictly forbidden (White Star Line, 1924). These restrictions addressed social conventions as to passenger status and also landing issues upon arrival in the USA. Public health officials could, given any evidence of illness in steerage class, public

Class	Imperator	Vaterland	Olympic
First	908	780	735
Second	606	560	674
Steerage	2,734	2,860	1,026
Crew	1,180	1,234	860
Total	5,428	5,434	3,295
Crew/passenger	0.28	0.29	0.35

Table II.
Passenger capacity of
selected liners (1914)

health officials could quarantine first and second class passengers who had had any contact with steerage passengers during a voyage (Johnson *et al.*, 1935). A no-contact rule was enforced by structural barriers and attentive shipboard personnel. An original Cunard Line (1932) memorandum to pursers entitled “Segregation of Classes” read:

Our attention has been drawn to criticisms made by passengers regarding the mixing of classes on board certain of our ships, with particular reference to Cabin public rooms and deck space being used by Tourist Third Cabin passengers. Suitable notices should be displayed on board indicating the class of passengers allowed in the various parts of the ship, and should any printed notices be required for this purpose, the necessary requisition should be sent to the Stationary Department. In addition to this, all reasonable efforts must be made to prevent passengers who are traveling in the lower classes from making use of the higher class public rooms and deck space.

The memorandum included a receipt for pursers to sign, detach, and return to Cunard headquarters indicating that the memo had been duly received and carefully noted.

The built-in capacity for steerage passengers to the USA became excessive in dramatic fashion with the passage in 1921 of the Emergency Quota Act followed in 1924 by the Johnson Reed Act. These US Government actions restricted immigration to 3 percent of nationals from each country based on the 1903 census and later to 2 percent based on the 1890 census. The acts were designed to hinder immigration from southern and southeastern Europe, as the Johnson-Reed Act (43 Statutes at Large 153) provided quotas for European countries based on the numbers of people recorded in the US 1890 census who could trace their origins to the particular country. Because few people had emigrated to the USA from countries like Italy and Greece prior to 1890, this resulted in severely restricting immigration from that region. Since, this was the largest source of immigration during the period, the market of immigrants traveling to the USA was essentially eliminated (Hill, 1943). Steamship companies, faced with losing a high-volume, low-cost traffic revenue source, shifted their strategic orientations to target another demographic in the market.

Tourist third class

The new low-class occupants were American tourists headed to Europe. The lines aggressively sought this lucrative market segment because it guaranteed occupancy in both directions thus simplifying and stabilizing their capacity management challenge (Hughes, 1973). Cunard’s *Mauretania*, for example, carried 1,138 such tourists (53 percent) out of a complement that totaled 2,145. This era of postwar travel was driven by the low cost of European tourism and a curious American population, having heard of or experienced Europe during the war years. In addition, economic stability at home and alcohol prohibition influenced the notion that travel was fun and leisurely. Before long, school teachers, students, artists, and other members of the middle class populated the upgraded (and renamed) “tourist third class.” Maxtone-Graham (1972, p. 169) reported that “companies discovered that with a little fresh paint, improved service, and a monogrammed company bedspread, space that seemed suitable only for minimal subsistence was quite acceptable to the new white collar steerage.” Some of the original steerage class, their status in the USA secured by hard work and success, were now able to join the new tourist third clientele and return to the old country for a visit.

Whereas they were open to adventure, to be sure, tourist third passengers were also more demanding than the original steerage immigrants. Dormitory accommodations were modified to become shared cabin space. Company-supplied linens, increased menu options, and more attentive steward service became the norm. The popularity of this mode of tourist third class travel resulted in some ships even becoming single class, thus avoiding the traditional class structure of transatlantic travel. Cunard, for example, upon reinstating Canadian services after the First World War (WWI) in May 1922, claimed that one single class ship, three dual-class ships and one tri-class ship would maintain their service (Cunard Line, 1922).

Second class

Second class passengers constitute a virtually invisible customer segment in the history of the transatlantic trade. Much has been written about the clientele, services, and luxuries in first class. The general conditions of steerage and tourist third have also been documented in books as well as movies. However, the intermediate second class of service is not clearly represented in published history. For example, Coleman (1976, p. 68) wrote of the *Titanic* disaster:

... on great liners it is commonly only the first class passengers and their pleasures that get remembered and described. Because the *Titanic* sank, and because her sinking was the most widely reported maritime disaster there ever was, a great deal is also known about the steerage passengers, and even those in second class, who were usually the most anonymous of all.

During those periods of time just before and after WWI, the number of second class accommodations was approximately equal to first class ones. However, the second class quarters were considerably smaller and less luxurious. On the *Leviathan* (formerly the *Vaterland*), christened in 1914, second class accommodations were described as having merely “the pretense of quality” (Braynard, 1972, p. 48). Second class afforded passengers smoking rooms, ladies lounges, a gymnasium, and a motorized lift. However, the cabins were two or four-person berths, without private toilets. Miller (1986, p. 13) described second class accommodations during the 1920s as, “a refinement of first class, although with far less obvious glitter, space, and even less effort on the part of hotel staff to ‘bend and please.’ Menus offered less of a selection and service tended to be not quite as prompt.” A White Star Line (1922) photo essay on the liner *Majestic*, after 30 pages of images from first class, shows one photo of a spartan second-class lounge. The caption reads, “The lounge in second cabin is attractive.” Historic details about the passengers in second class are limited, but they were usually business travelers and upper-middle class American tourists who, while not willing or able to afford first class, demanded a level of service befitting their level of prosperity at home.

The expanding industrial revolution necessitated legions of travelers to seek out markets for mass-produced goods and to acquire the raw materials for their production. Second class passengers were an important and stable part of the market for ocean liner companies in the transatlantic trade. However, that segment of the market did not garner anything near the level of publicity or acclaim enjoyed by first class.

First class

Occupants of first class included aristocrats, the wealthy, captains of industry and, in later years, celebrities. Even though immigrants in steerage paid the bills in the transatlantic trade's early years, the demands of first class service drove most of the design and delivery system decisions made by top managers of the ocean liner companies. In the 1890s, steamship owners began responding to the tastes and demands of wealthy travelers with luxuries and service that exceeded those offered by the very best five-star hotels. These rich passengers were attracted by the same opulence they enjoyed in wealthy industrial cities of Eastern USA. This group, as Wall (1977, p. 99) explained, "ensured that the next generation of liners would graduate from seagoing hotels to the 'floating palaces' of the 20th century."

Competition intensified among ocean liner companies commensurate with the ever-increasing emphases on size, speed, and luxury. Indeed, in the early years of the twentieth century, first class accommodations and public areas began to lose any semblance of shipboard appearances. Prior (1992, p. 14) cited the explanation of a steamship line director for exactly why the first class interior of an ocean liner should not look like a ship: "... people who use these ships are not pirates; they do not dance hornpipes; they are mostly seasick American ladies, and the one thing they want to forget when they are on the vessel is that they are on a ship at all."

Whereas English first class accommodations tended toward the stately elegance of solid, reliable country homes, the German first class reflected a stark and austere richness of a floating palace. A Norddeutscher Lloyd (1912, p. 9) promotional brochure from the first author's private collection noted, "The first class accommodations on board the modern steamships ... can always compete with that of the most palatial hotels." Combining luxurious splendor with additional touches of class (e.g. food service by Ritz-Carlton restaurant staff), the German Norddeutscher Lloyd and Hamburg-Amerika lines competed successfully with the English for the American first class passengers.

The motifs and accoutrements of first class reflected a move toward "hotelism" in the early 1900s. The design of liner interiors was influenced by the styles of Europe's greatest resort hotels, and was a response to the expectations of first class passengers. For those travelers:

... the ocean was no longer an avenue for onetime adventurers or displaced persons but for a socially secure stratum of well-heeled travelers who crossed with the seasons and expected no disruption of their style or scale of living, no unsettling changes in their surroundings (Brinnin and Gaulin, 1988, p. 29).

Aside from the range of services, the space and layout of the physical environments were also of the utmost importance. Maxtone-Graham (1972, p. 48) illustrates that a primary consideration for first class passengers was adequate space: "Onboard ship, it is a consideration that outweighs all the caviar, high-servant ratio, and sumptuous decoration ... there should never be a need to get anywhere first or, God forbid, to line up."

Coleman (1976) described the first class passengers of the 1920s in terms of four categories:

- (1) famous celebrities;
- (2) the very wealthy;

- (3) the ordinarily wealthy; and
- (4) business travelers.

Celebrities included film stars, athletes, and royalty. They provided ocean liners more than just travel fares. These passengers became the focus of increasingly competitive publicity campaigns designed by ocean liner companies to attract the traveling public of all classes away from the competition. The private and public needs of these passengers were attended to carefully. The very wealthy passengers included multimillionaires who usually traveled in order to spend seasons and holidays at varying locales. The ordinarily rich were mostly Americans who had made a fortune and wanted to travel in Europe (Coleman, 1976). White Star Lines (1922, p. 3) targeted those particular wealthy customers specifically with advertisements such as, “the daily life of an ocean voyage on board a superliner de-luxe goes on in a social atmosphere reflecting, in essence, the polite manners of bright continental cities known to tourists, and the best among English and American clubs and houses.”

Even though they did not carry powerful public personae, business travelers were given premier service because they traveled the most frequently of all first class passengers. For example, thousands of buyers crossing back and forth between the continents were highly sought after and luxuriously accommodated because they made multiple crossings each year. In fact, it was not unusual for the typical buyer to make more than 200 crossings during his or her career. Interestingly, about a third of those business travelers were women.

As the industry evolved, publicists began to analyze and interpret many specific aspects of the trade, even down to the level of unique qualities and cultures of individual ships. For example, Lacey (1973, p. 33) showed that different ships of the Cunard Line reflected varying aspects of the high society lifestyle:

The *Mauretania* ... attracts the younger set ... Junior League ... Vanity Fair and Vogue ... the beach at Southampton or Newport ... polo at Meadowbrook ...

The *Berengaria*, ... attracts the ostentatious ... tempestuous with the exploding of flashlights, the pursuit of reporters ... electric with great names ...

The *Aquitania* attracts a more refined type of customer ... the country family sort of atmosphere ... people of social consequence, people of title, people who like their transatlantic crossing to taste of that rather formal subdivision into hierarchies – social, political, hereditary – which mark their lives ... where blood and achievement both count.

Industry decline

As the decade of the 1920s entered into its fateful final stages, the transatlantic liner trade entered its last great period of expansion. New ships reflected increasing demands for speedy crossings. For example, White Star Line promotional material describing the *Majestic* as the “world’s largest ship” and a veritable “ocean-borne palace” accompanies such exaltation with a paragraph on her speed, and only later describing the “unsurpassed luxurious splendor” (author’s personal collection):

But not for size alone is the *Majestic* distinguished. She is also one of the world’s fastest ships. From her trial trip it was known her speed was more than 25 knots per hour, with power in reserve to make it greater as her machinery through use on successive voyages attained its

maximum efficiency. Such speed as the ship has shown insures an average ocean passage of five days from land to land.

The example mirrors the evolution in the ocean liner industry during the 1920s. Not unlike the evolution of the airline industry in the latter half of the twentieth century, the trend moved toward the less pretentious. As the industry evolved further, business began to slip in the 1930s, resulting in consolidation of some of the most famous lines, including Cunard and White Star. As well, numerous famous ocean liners were scrapped (e.g. *Mauretania*, *Megantic*, *Leviathan*) during this decade. Whereas wealthy passengers still bought the most luxurious suites, accommodations in first, second, and tourist third classes were seldom occupied. The Great Depression, which began in 1929, did not affect most of the richest travelers who utilized first class regularly. However, plummeting business did drive a negative downturn in business and tourist travel that was extreme. Eventually, the golden age of the transatlantic trade ended with the beginning of the Second World War (WWII) in 1939. Whereas post-WWII (i.e. after 1945) passenger trade was eventually robust, political and social changes brought about by the depression as well as the war changed the face of the transatlantic trade industry drastically and permanently.

Life onboard ocean liners was no longer driven by the social scenes of earlier days. After WWII the decorous norms of the liner industry lost their luster and passengers did not seem to mind. As Brinnin and Gaulin (1988, p. 229) expressed, "What most post-war travelers wanted was a reasonably swift, pleasant, and inexpensive way to get to Europe. If this meant settling for efficiency and aesthetic nullity of a Route 66 motel or a downtown Statler-Hilton, so what?" Transportation reassumed itself as the driving force for shipbuilding and design as the advent of airline travel began to presage the final end of the transatlantic trade.

Onboard: service providers and delivery

Service provision on ocean liners was an undertaking of unparalleled complexity. Combined delivery of transportation, entertainment, accommodation, and meals to 4,000 passengers occurred in an enclosed system. Responding immediately to the environment (e.g. weather, emergencies) while still accomplishing delivery required a large and diverse staff of trained providers. Standard shipboard organization and complements were robust enough to remain essentially unchanged throughout the entire era of the ocean liners industry. However, within that organization, the management and provision of service evolved based on subtle variations in technological and sociopolitical forces in the industry environment. In what follows, we explain this evolution.

Onboard divisions

Onboard service providers of the transatlantic trade could be split into two categories: operations and services. Operations consisted of crewmembers who maintained the core service provisions of the ship while it was underway and focused on shipboard technological and engineering activity. These members ensured that the ship moved safely and effectively from port to port. Services consisted of crewmembers who provided services to passengers directly (e.g. stewards, hosts) or indirectly (e.g. cooks, custodians).

The operations side was typically divided into Engineering and Deck Departments, which were overseen by the chief engineer and chief officer. The services side was divided into Purser and Steward Departments, which were overseen by the Chief Purser and the Chief Steward. In addition, most shipboard organizations included a chief medical officer and staff. A chief radio officer oversaw the Communications Department (Hill, 1943; Perry, 1931). The captain, officially the ship's master, oversaw the entire organization. Though primarily a seaman responsible for safe transit, the captain was also a company representative with social obligations to passengers (Brinnin, 1971). The captain commanded and organization that had military-like structure and discipline. He was responsible for the safe passage of vessel and passengers and the maintenance of a precise schedule established by the company. The staff captain assisted the captain and, although a qualified shipmaster, his actual role was chief of staff, which afforded the captain more effective administration of the entire ship.

Onboard staffing

The largest ocean liners of the twentieth century carried crew complements of at least 1,000 members. The staffing ratio was approximately one crewmember for every three passengers. Of the shipboard divisions, the largest number of crewmembers belonged to the Steward's Department. Although the ship itself could be steamed and navigated by 50 officers and men from the Deck and Engineering Departments, meeting passenger needs and expectations required no less than several hundred crewmembers. Technology had a large effect on staffing requirements in operations, not services. As steamships, the liners needed large numbers of boilers to feed steam to reciprocating engines or turbines. Prior to the conversion from coal to oil in the early 1920s, at least 200 fire stokers were necessary to load, move, and shovel coal into the boilers. Circa 1910 on the coal-burning *Mauretania*, the "black gang" consisted of 204 stokers who fed coal to the boilers and 120 trimmers who moved coal from storage bunkers to the boilers. Those crewmembers were responsible for feeding 192 furnaces supporting 23 boilers.

The entire kitchen staff had approximately one chef, 28 cooks and bakers, 50 leading stewards, and 367 subordinate stewards. These crewmembers were responsible for the care and feeding of more than 3,000 passengers and crew and remained integral to the ocean liner industry throughout its lifecycle (Hopkins, 1910). In the late 1920s the *Majestic's* kitchen, steward and wait complement consisted of 675 crewmembers, whereas the entire Engineering Department's complement consisted of only 275 (Perry, 1931). In addition to waiters and stateroom stewards, the Cunard Line (1932) identified no less than 40 specific job titles and specializations for standard catering departments.

Specialized service provision

The ocean liner's interior design, crossing time, and technological innovations were the most fundamental attributes of service. However, passengers spending several days of time physically contained onboard became acutely aware of the smaller features and details of shipboard life. Consideration of these service aspects illustrates how the transatlantic trade period of the ocean liner industry involved customer service that was uniquely sophisticated compared to any other industry. Every aspect of daily life,

including food, housekeeping, entertainment, and physical recreation, depended on varying levels of personalized attention from crewmembers. Gregory (1991, p. 198) reported that the British lines offered the best service to passengers, even tying service management specialties to historical and anthropological aspects of culture:

Devoted Cunard and White Star workers know their place and combined civility, friendliness, and respect in a most extraordinary way. This was the product of a hierarchical society that had not been rocked by revolution, by an underlying concern for one's fellow man, and by the naval discipline that prevailed. The French could not quite find the correct balance between servility and self-respect, the Germans were too stiff and rigid and the Yankees were not about to take any nonsense from anybody. Their ancestors had not crossed the ocean in steeage for them to be subservient to the rich or titled.

The level of passenger contact varied for different members of the crew. Deck officers occasionally interacted with passengers in conversation. Sometimes passengers saw deck crewmembers working. By contrast, passengers rarely ever saw any of the hundreds of engineering crewmembers. The Steward's Department had the most continuous passenger contact. The nature of this service relationship was profound, as the client lived in the delivery system for days or weeks and was unable to leave the service environment (safely) even if desired. The routine of standard service engagements was uniquely regimented in the liner industry, as thousands of clients (i.e. passengers) entered and departed the organization (i.e. the ship) at about the same time.

Steward staff was always available to provide for every aspect of daily passenger activity in the higher service classes (Johnson *et al.*, 1935). Room stewards or stewardesses accommodated needs for cabin food service, housekeeping, running errands, and every manner of demand imaginable. There were smoking room stewards, lounge stewards, and even bath stewards. Deck stewards were critical for the important function of arranging and enforcing deck chair assignments. Game stewards were always standing by to respond to passenger requests, as were the stewards of the dining rooms (Perry, 1931).

Career advancement

Horizontal and vertical crewmember classifications and promotions varied based on function, department, and experience. Whereas line and staff officers were often transferred to other ships as they gained experience and seniority, most crewmembers spent many years on the same ship (Gregory, 1991). This trend resulted in an extremely experienced staff who knew how to handle the most difficult and complex service demands from passengers. These staff members almost always knew the most particular wishes of frequent travelers. In addition, these service providers were typically from families with a tradition of working on ocean liners. For example, on the *Queen Mary* in the 1930s, "dominating the ship's personnel were the working elite of Southampton, the 'Cunard Yankees.'" These were the men and women who, endowed with a innate sense of stewardship based on family history, accorded American passengers a gentility and "a kind of noblesse-oblige authority few Americans would ever themselves assume" (Brinnin and Gaulin, 1988, p. 181). Indeed, it was not uncommon for service staff to spend more than 20 or 30 years on the same ship.

Career progression involved rotation through various service management capacities. For example, a typical young man in the Steward's Department would

begin as an assistant waiter serving water and rolls. After extensive training and a year or more of service in this capacity, he would be promoted to the position of waiter in the tourist class. He could then work all the way up to first class based on performance. The very best of these cases would be promoted to head of staff, reclassified to tourist class to supervise the waiters, with the opportunity to work up through the classes again. Another opportunity for these crewmembers was to become a restaurant manager at one of a ship's many restaurants. A similar promotion system applied to cabin stewards and stewardesses, who moved between classes based on expertise and seniority, typically remaining on the same ship. Capable cabin stewards or stewardesses were critical to an enjoyable voyage. In fact, frequent passengers would often book the same cabins and request the same attendants on every trip in order to enjoy a consistent standard of personalized service.

Tippling: a service management control system

The complex delivery of services to passengers was facilitated by an equally complex bottom-driven communal tipping system. Whereas a capable deck steward in the 1920s could expect wages of about \$25 per month, he could also expect \$250 in tips over a five or eight day crossing. The steward would pass about one-third of this amount to the "pantry man" who linked the steward with the kitchen. The dining room stewards shared tips from passengers with the "counterman" who, in turn, tipped the chef. Cabin stewards tipped the pantry man, and those who helped respond successfully to irregular passenger requests at odd hours were well-rewarded. Tips even circulated internally: stewards who served crew members and helped maintain their living spaces received tip income (Maxtone-Graham, 1972).

Service management and the service delivery system depended upon a network of tipping. To be sure, salaries were so low that families could not live without the additional income. Hopkins (1910) noted that passengers did not begrudge these "fees." It was understood that, without them, the cost of passage would be higher. There were contingencies built into the tipping system. Tips for females, for example, were expected to be two-thirds that of tips for males and second-class tips were about half those expected in first-class. The system benefited the ocean liners as passengers were meeting a large part of the payroll. It placed pressure on employees who had the most direct contact with passengers, as their shipmates with less customer contact depended on them for their tipping income. The tipping system was thus designed to support all the service providers, and there was considerable tipping on ocean liners. For example, as the Steward's Department were officially on duty from 0600 to 2000, first class passengers treated them as personal servants at all hours, and always with extra remuneration for laying out clothes, preparing baths, and bringing food requests outside official hours and assigned duties.

The life of a service provider

Whereas much is known about passenger experiences onboard great ocean liners, little has been recorded about the daily lives of service providers. Violet Jessop, who survived the *Titanic* and *Britannic* disasters, gives insight into the daily lives of those who served the needs of transatlantic travelers in her memoirs, which were written in 1934 (Jessop, 1997). She went to sea at age 21 and served as a cabin stewardess for 42 years. Her specific recollections of a service provider's life onboard from 1910 to 1934

give insight into the activities necessary to maintain the levels of service described above.

The biggest challenges to service delivery derived from climactic weather conditions. Weather patterns on the North Atlantic during any season were capable of wreaking havoc on even the largest ocean liners. Once underway on her first transatlantic trip after working in the West Indies, Jessop (1997, p. 90) recalled:

What I was totally unprepared for were the terrific batterings the North Atlantic could administer . . . it needed a certain amount of willpower to remain at my post in the second class of a New York bound liner learning to assimilate the intricacies of service under trying conditions.

The transatlantic trade was notorious for bad weather. During Jessop's (1997, p. 89) search for employment at sea she initially avoided transatlantic service. She acknowledged that transatlantic work was "very arduous and the hours very long. Moreover, the type of passenger who patronized it expected all the service the company could give and got it." Such passengers were predominately American. Jessop (1997, p. 74) explained that, while demanding, they were also more inclined to be friendly, understanding, and more appreciative than those of other nationalities. She wrote:

They [Americans] want the best that life has to offer and they get it in their stride, leaving one panting and exhausted in the process. You were faced with the paradox of being considerably overworked and yet much happier and free because of their attitude.

A common lament of cabin attendants resembled that of students in contemporary universities. "Does the professor think this is the only class I am taking?" For crewmembers like Jessop, it was "does the passenger think they are the only one whose needs I am serving?" Even though organizational systems for handling housekeeping, meal service, and entertainment were flexible for accommodating individual passenger needs, there were limits. Yet, passengers invariably expected crewmembers to overcome them. For example, Jessop described that what passengers may have seen as simple requests (e.g. delivering a prepared meal to a cabin during odd hours) were exhausting. Thus, neither passengers nor the liner's top management were flexible in return to the flexibility shown by the crew. Jessop (1997, p. 92) wrote of her experiences on the *Olympic*:

As long as stewards toiled uncomplainingly, very little was done by employers to alleviate difficulties. Even if a protest was made, it was ignored. It was not surprising that conditions of work and living of the ordinary steward had undergone no improvements in years. Nothing had been done to make labor easy. Men worked sixteen hours a day, every day of the week, scrubbed and cleaned from morn till night, moved mountains of baggage, carved and served food, cleaned a host of apparently useless metalwork till their very souls seemed permeated with metal polish, and kept long watches into the night, all for hasty meals standing up in a steamy pantry where decks were awash with the droppings of the last meal.

Discussion

A typical ocean liner during the golden age was a microcosmic city. Inhabitants hailed from all levels and areas of various social spectra. Regardless of class or wealth, each passenger received the same core service: passage to the destination. Above and beyond the core service, however, peripheral services varied dramatically. Steerage

and tourist third class passengers had their basic physical hygiene needs met. On the other hand, first class passengers received a bundle of specific peripheral services designed to fulfill even psychological and emotional needs. Physical as well as mental services were important to this passenger group. Status, wealth, heredity, and power were acknowledged and accommodated by the design of the organizational and service delivery systems. Service was managed by an extensive staff of providers. Simple processes such as assigning dining room seats or deck chair space in first class carried levels of importance rivaling those of the basic services provided to passengers in other classes. As such, they were handled only by the most skilled crew members with great care and in accordance with established norms and traditions. Motivations to provide intense service derived from personal and cultural service ethics, tipping systems, and other bases of control.

The physical layout and delivery systems of ocean liners were the result of an interaction between socio-political and demographic forces. These forces derived from historical events and served to guide evolution of the industry. For example, the Johnson Reed and Emergency Quota Acts affected the immigrant and tourist third markets significantly. Shipboard accommodations evolved according to prevailing norms of society and the need to address such factors. Table III digests these events in historical context.

Technological innovations in the ocean liner industry included screw propellers, wireless radios, steam turbines, and oil-fired boilers. These innovations were competitive enablers for ocean liner companies in light of the growing market need for fast crossings. Therefore, they quickly became industry standards. Table IV summarizes these innovations chronologically.

Advancing technology in the airline industry brought the era of the great transatlantic liners to an end. Air travel deposed sea travel across the Atlantic Ocean despite pronouncements that the new form of transportation would never be viable. Initially, the weekly Pan Am Clipper service inaugurated in 1937 did not seem threatening to the transatlantic trade. However, the first commercial jetliner crossing in

1839	Samuel Cunard receives British subsidy to provide scheduled mail service to North America
1855	British Passenger Act – established minimal accommodation standards
1897	German Fleet Law – established goal of German maritime supremacy resulting in increased emphasis and funding for merchant passenger service
1902	International Mercantile Marine – J.P. Morgan attempts to control North Atlantic trade by purchasing Red Star, Dominion, Leyland and White Star. This results in British subsidy to Cunard for <i>Mauretania</i> and <i>Lusitania</i> , first of the huge express liners
1912	Sinking of the <i>Titanic</i> – results in enhanced safety regulations and international ice patrol
1914	World War I – war reparations and combat losses changed the structure of the industry.
1921	Post war recovery enhanced business and tourist travel to Europe Quota Act – essentially eliminated the immigrant trade to the USA by placing severe restrictions on the number of new arrivals
1929	Great Depression – severely curtailed travel resulting in major industry consolidations and ship disposals
1939	World War II – war reparations and wartime losses once again restructure the industry. Post war travel increases as Europe rebuilds

Table III.
Historical events
affecting the transatlantic
trade

1833	<i>Royal William</i> – first substantially steam crossing
1838	<i>Sirius</i> – first continuous steam crossing
1845	<i>Great Britain</i> – first iron hull – first screw propeller
1857	<i>Adriatic</i> – last transatlantic wooden paddle wheeler built
1867	Last paddle wheeler built
1878	<i>City of Berlin</i> – first liner with electric lights
1879	<i>Buenos Ayrean</i> – first steamship built of steel
1881	<i>Notting Hill</i> – first liner built as twin screw
1889	<i>City of Paris</i> – first twin screw, steel hulled liner
1899	<i>St Paul</i> – first on board newspaper using reports received by wireless (radio)
1903	<i>Lucania</i> – first wireless contact with both sides of the Atlantic at once
1904	<i>Victorian</i> – first liner with steam turbines
1909	<i>Republic</i> – first major rescue of liner passengers at sea using wireless
1912	<i>Titanic</i> – loss of the “unsinkable” ship
1921	Beginning of industry conversion from coal to oil fired boilers
1922	<i>Columbus</i> – last large liner built with reciprocating engines
1937	Pan Am Clipper starts weekly flying boat service
1952	First jetliner crossing of the Atlantic
1958	Boeing 707 establishes first scheduled jetliner service across the Atlantic

Table IV.
Technological
innovations affecting the
transatlantic trade

1952, without question, signaled the end of the ocean liners. In 1958, the Boeing 707 became the first regularly scheduled jetliner service across the Atlantic. Henceforth, no historical context in any industry has featured complexities rivaling service management on transatlantic ocean liners during the golden age.

Implications

Our undertaking provides several implications for contemporary service management application. They are summarized in Table V and elaborated in what follows. First, it is possible for an organization to provide the same core service to vastly different market segments. Each segment, however, has its own “interpretation” of the core and peripheral services being met. In the case of the ocean liners, the core service was transportation to a destination, but the reasons for such travel and the importance to travelers were significantly different across classes. For steerage passengers, travel led

A business can offer the same core service to vastly different market segments if aware of how segments perceive the core service differently

The management of services should reflect consumer expectations

Not only well-trained but highly loyal employees are crucial to excellent service management

Well-designed delivery systems and customizability of delivery processes add value to core services

Technologies developing simultaneously in an industry can eventually clash and affect service management performance

Table V.
Summary implications
for service management

a new life. Second class tourists and business travelers were enroute to destinations for short-term purposes. First class passengers were headed to a destination and literally basking in the trappings of the process. Companies, therefore, must be continually aware of customer needs as customers see them, because those needs can vary even around a given core service. A current example, not as complex as the ocean liners, is commercial airlines. Passenger access to first, business, and economy class is controlled on airlines. Entry and exit from the aircraft is regulated to favor passengers in higher classes. Refreshment service also varies. Though these elements of service management on airlines are above and beyond the core transportation service, they are tied to how airline passengers perceive classes of service on airline journeys. Such a focus demands significant management attention to identifying and understanding the needs of the customer on a virtually personal level, and then designing delivery systems to satisfy those needs.

Second, to effectively provide service to different market segments with varying needs at one location, a certain customer management style is important. Customers who see themselves as part of a particular category (based on price, social class, or other characteristics) will expect such "status" to be acknowledged and protected. The strength of that expectation will increase at higher service class levels. On ocean liners, physical barriers and attentive employees managed these expectations.

Third, loyal and well-trained employees are most important in customer contact roles. In situations involving particularly high intensity contact, the personal characteristics of the server are important to service encounters. When customers have continued direct contact with a delivery system over a period of time, the abilities of service staff are regularly challenged. The nature of such direct contact service demands attention to both technical and interpersonal skills. On the ocean liners, direct contact servers remained with the same company and ship for years. Thus, they gained subtle and profound levels of experience on the job and with particular clients. Extensive training, long apprenticeships, and military-like discipline all contributed to the high level of service provided to passengers. In addition, the steamship lines exploited socioeconomic climates in staffing their liners. Thus, despite difficult working conditions, the reliability of the job resulted in long tenures among staff. Though the organizational commitment of such employees may be open to question, the result is consistently outstanding service encounters. Such employees frequently command higher salaries. Additionally, realizing loyalty in modern management contexts where employees have multiple employment options requires considering of a large range of employee needs.

Fourth, well-designed delivery systems and customizability of the delivery process are important. The simple act of providing odd-hour food service to ocean liner passengers and crew demanded an intricately planned delivery process. Outstanding delivery systems operate effortlessly because they are designed to be unobtrusive. For example, ocean liner passengers were kept wholly separate from the operating aspects of the ship. Passengers were not allowed in engine spaces, on the bridge, in kitchens or similar spaces without special permission. To be sure, entire networks of passages and spaces existed beyond the view of passengers to provide an infrastructure for seamless service delivery. Similar to Disney World with its underground passages facilitating trash removal, food delivery, and cast (staff) logistics, this separation from "back room" activity allowed passengers to

marvel in their surroundings without being faced with the realities of the service delivery. Additionally, while it was not possible to customize the basic transportation service itself, ocean liners found ways to provide peripheral services that were customized extensively at the delivery point. This customization gave passengers a sense of personalized service, even though they were just like the 2,000 other people traveling from one point to another.

Fifth, as the transatlantic ocean liner industry evolved, the evolutions of core technologies underlying organizational performance did not always coordinate with one another. As a result, our analysis suggests that when such technologies are leveraged for the purpose of meeting customer needs more effectively, clashes between them can arise and be debilitating to service delivery. In the case of the Collins lines, for example, the evolution of engine technology enabling faster crossings advanced more quickly than did hull and structural design of the ships. As the liners intended to become as fast as possible when serving customers, the engines were eventually too powerful for the ships. As a result, the Collins line incurred several disasters, as described above. In modern contexts, organizations and firms in service industries also have multiple evolving technologies. One example is contemporary universities, which are increasingly implementing distance learning technologies for greater convenience in the delivery of educational services to students and working professionals in MBA programs. However, distance learning technology clashes with classroom technologies (e.g. slide presentations, video media) designed for students located onsite. Those clashes present unique challenges when trying to maintain high quality service delivery. Thus, being aware of how the interactions between multiple evolving technologies weigh upon service delivery can aid contemporary organizations in ensuring reliable service performance.

Conclusion

It is tempting to focus primarily on the glamour of first class service as portrayed in published media and film accounts. The wealthy, the celebrities, and the elite were accorded a standard of service that, considering the environment and historical period, was extraordinary. There is more to the service management story, however, than sumptuous menus and pictures of ostentatious decor. It is not possible to understand the greatness of service management on early ocean liners without considering the daily activities of those who staffed them. That aspect of the industry was seldom chronicled. Little has been written of the daily activities and struggles of the men and women who staffed and managed the great ocean liners. Their stories are largely forgotten. Without the study of history in management contexts, their lessons for contemporary providers in organizational contexts also risks being lost. Progress depends on retentiveness (Santayana, 1905). To the point, we end with a passage from Jessop (1997, p. 112):

For long stretches of time, we stewards were almost forgotten; only during long voyages were we acknowledged. For our part, we would have liked to think that the niceness of those we served was not patronage, that the memory of generous service would live long after the trip was over. But that was hardly ever so: We were the ones who went on remembering long after they had forgotten; they considered they had paid for all with a coin.

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