

Main: DiJulius And His Secret Service

BizTech Profile

Not-so Secret Service

An Interview with Entrepreneur/Author John DiJulius



Women say it's easier to find a new gynecologist than a new hair stylist. John DiJulius, President of The DiJulius Group, a consulting firm specializing in customer service, gets a lot of laughs with that line during his presentations, and the women in the audience nod their heads wholeheartedly in agreement.

DiJulius owns John Robert's Spas, a chain of high end salons in Cleveland, and is author of two books on the service industry: *Secret Service* (2003) and *What's the Secret? To Providing a World-Class Customer Experience*, which recently reached # 1 on Amazon.com. Despite a lagging economy, DiJulius's spas are having their best year ever in 2008. The secret, DiJulius says, is *good service*.

"I'm very deep, but not wide. I eat, sleep, and drink customer service."

DiJulius received poor grades in school and dropped out of college. He credits his mother for his current success. She always believed in him, despite his tendency toward trouble. She always expected him to do the right thing.

When he and his wife Stacy started their business, they knew they wanted to do the right thing by their employees. They wanted to provide them opportunities they weren't getting elsewhere in the industry. They also wanted clients to view them as a necessity, not a commodity, and they wanted price to be irrelevant.

"We never wanted to be known as a great salon, we wanted to be known as a great business that hopefully people bench marked against."

John Robert's Spas puts all of its employees through a rigorous customer service boot camp. All stylists get an intensive 8-12 month apprenticeship before ever being set loose on the floor (or your hair). Next, they work at the Protégé' salon on Chagrin Boulevard where haircuts are around \$25.00, as they gain more experience and build up a clientele. After that, they are promoted to one of JRS's signature salons and stylists can begin charging \$45.00 and up for a cut. Proving great service trumps price, JRS's signature salons charge 2-5 times as much as most of their competitors, and yet, according to DiJulius, they're the busiest salons in northeast Ohio.

DiJulius calls himself CVO of his company, Chief "Visionary" Officer. Always researching better

ways to serve customers, he says his books are allowing him to share the "secrets" he's learned over the years.

About those book titles? DiJulius says he's never read the popular "law of attraction" books based on the hit film *The Secret*. At first he was even upset about the closeness of those titles to his own, but then realized it was great publicity. While he may not consciously be riding the law of attraction wave, his employees are trained to visualize their ideal customers and figure out what they need to do (changing store hours, for instance) to better accommodate them. He also says he has five personal and five professional goals taped to his mirror at home.

"I've just always had the visualization concept, I've always taught that because that's what's worked for me."

Aside from visualization, DiJulius has an endless supply of ideas and policies in place to make customers feel like they matter. For instance, employees are expected to call each customer, by name, at least four times during a visit. He also has a "beat the greet" policy, in which employees should always beat the customers to saying hello. They are also expected to find reasons to compliment guests.

But isn't there a chance these "tools" might be perceived as manipulative? For instance, we've all had times where we've tried to voice a complaint about customer service only to find the scripted response of the person on the receiving end adding to our frustration.

"Well, when we drop the ball we make it right. Employees don't have to ask permission to send flowers or do whatever they think will help the client feel heard." John Robert's Spas have an Experience Guarantee which states, "If for any reason our guests are not 100% satisfied, they can pay what they think is fair." But all of these intentions are nothing if not given sincerely.

DiJulius says, "Service isn't something you just deliver, it's who you are. You're that type of neighbor, you're that type of friend, you're that type of relative. You just have that heart."

DiJulius comes from a tough background. A lifelong Clevelander, he was one of six children being raised by a single mother. He acknowledges he's been able to create an exceptional life, and says, "My purpose is to live an extraordinary life so countless others will as well."

Giving back means treating customers and employees well, and donating time and money to good causes. John Robert's Spas are involved with The Rainbow Babies and Children's Unit at University Hospitals. Giving back also means teaching others the skills that led to your success. He says the reason most people don't provide good service is because they have not been taught.

"You don't see a lot of front line employees traveling first class, or getting \$100.00 haircuts." If they have not experienced world class service, how would they know to provide it? To that end, each JRS's employee receives pampering in the form of spa services on their birthday, and they are taken to dinner at the restaurant of their choice to celebrate when they are promoted. DiJulius says the lessons in giving and receiving service his employees learn serve them well in all areas of their lives.

Most of DiJulius' time these days is spent consulting, and his motto is "Changing the World by Starting a Customer Service Revolution." On October 15th, he will be conducting a public workshop in Cleveland where he'll teach about the "ten commandments" for customer service detailed in his latest book.

When asked about his city he says, "Sometimes when I read the paper I get depressed and wonder why I'm living here. I'll read that we're the dumbest, and the poorest and the cheapest, and it bothers me because there is so much good about Cleveland. There's nothing like Midwest values, the neighborhoods, the people here. If I'm remembered for being a great businessman or speaker or author I've really failed. I hope my legacy will be: husband, father and friend, who happened to be good in business. And if that's true, if that's what I want, there's no better place to be those things than in Cleveland."

DiJulius says despite his difficult childhood he was very fortunate to have a wonderful mother who raised him with those great Midwest values. She passed away just after he opened his first salon, in 1993.

When asked what she'd think of her "problem child" now, he laughs and says, "As long as I'm doing the right things, keeping focus on helping people's lives, she's happy."

Visit DiJulius online at <http://www.johndijulius.com>.

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