

## SPECIAL FILE SERVICE DEPARTMENT



Charles MacPherson, professional butler

### CUSTOMER CARE

# At Your Service!

Ford hires a professional butler to teach dealers how to offer exceptional customer service.

**W**hat does a butler know about car dealerships? How does being able to tell the difference between a dessert fork and a salad fork relevant to ordering car parts?

Charles MacPherson, professional butler and best-selling author, believes that good customer service is based on the same principles, whether it's selling a hot dog or setting up an appointment for a brake job. He's been hired by Ford Canada to conduct an unconventional cross country training tour teaching communication and service skills to Ford service advisors.

MacPherson, who is equally at home at the palace of the Prince of Dubai, and the villa of Oscar de la Renta, conducts training sessions for hotels and household management for clients around the world. He is also the founder and president of the only registered butler academy in North America. "This was the first time a Fortune 500 company had hired me to work on such a scale," he says. "I have incredible projects around the world, but this was a great undertaking. It's been very exciting for me."

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### Face time

Like a butler, a dealership's customer service representative spends a lot of face time with the customer. "Right away, we have the same job," says MacPherson. "We're facing the customer."

The training program was set up in hotels across Canada, and based on the concept of "see, feel, change." When participants arrived at the venue, a valet parked their car and breakfast was served. Seminars were conducted by MacPherson, and a Ford representative, about customer service and skills. Throughout the day, participants were involved in a

"hospitality anthropology" process, to better understand the touchpoints of exceptional customer service.

"It's about communication," says MacPherson. "How do I put people at ease? I look them in the eye, have my body language face them, and pay attention. Those are transferrable skills."

Exposure to different situations throughout the day – the hospitality anthropology – drove home the les-

sons of the day. "We asked participants how they felt when someone greeted them at their car, when they were asked if they had any allergies at lunch, if someone forgot their dessert," says MacPherson. "Those experiences were part of the teaching material. When they've been in those situations, and felt what it's like, the light bulb goes on."

### Great feedback

To prepare MacPherson for the tour, he was taken to many Ford stores, to observe how staff interacted with customers and with each other. "I talked to a lot of service advisors and

managers, and listened to them talk about their day," MacPherson says.

From a hospitality perspective, he saw a distinct parallel between a hotel's front desk and the service department's counter. "The type of welcome you'd get in a hotel should be similar to the welcome you'd get in a dealership," MacPherson notes.

"Walking around the counter, talking to the customer, shaking their hand, handing them their keys, that's what we do in the hospitality industry."

The sessions were one day each, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., with 35 to 55 people per session. MacPherson admits that at first, people were skeptical. But after a while, they realized how they could put the lessons to good use at the dealership.

"We had great feedback," says Curt Skaluba, Vice President of Customer Service at Ford Canada. "People realized it was basically the same process, and they were learning valuable skills. That really resonated with them."

### Empathy is important

Participants learned that self confidence can make a difference. "Everyone is attracted to someone with self confidence," says MacPherson. "That's what the tips and tricks are all about – how to be a great communicator."

As an example, MacPherson offers a situation in which a repair is running 15 minutes late. "A butler would never let that go," he says. "He would let his client know well ahead of time, so they could re-arrange their schedule. It may only be 15 minutes, but it could impact many other items on a busy agenda. Similarly, it's up to the service advisor to call the client and advise them if there's been a change."

MacPherson drives a Volvo, and his own experiences at the dealership helped him relate to the participants. "I take care of my cars, because I know that's how to get them to last a long time," he says. "When I would talk about my car, everyone in the audience laughed – how are we going to deal with that? We could all relate."

Whether they're buying a high-fashion handbag or getting their car serviced, a customer is still the customer. "And it's because of them that we can pay the bills," MacPherson explains. "So we need to be grateful to them. We need to respect them, and their time. Empathy is very important in this field."

As far as MacPherson is concerned, all his students already have the necessary skills. "They just needed to be reminded," he says. "I truly believe that. And I know that I can help them create an exceptional customer experience."

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