

## A New View of Security and Customer Service at Philadelphia's Tallest Office Building

### Comcast Center

**Situation:** Just as the new 58-story Comcast Center has changed Philadelphia's skyline, the developer, premier principal tenant and security company have changed the perception of security. Liberty Property Trust, the building's developer and owner, and Philadelphia-based Comcast Corporation, the principal tenant, partnered with Allied Universal Security Services to change the profile of the traditional security officer to create highly effective and specialized ambassadors for the property.

Security and customer service were top priorities for the Comcast Center, a 975-foot-high structure encompassing approximately 1,253,000 rentable square feet, inclusive of 24,000 square feet of restaurant and retail space. The Comcast Center, which opened in April 2008, also includes a public park, an entrance to the Suburban Station commuter rail station and underground retail concourse, an enclosed winter garden, and a gourmet food market.

As construction workers began to pour concrete and set steel for the \$540-million landmark, Comcast Founder and Director Ralph Roberts, Comcast Chairman and CEO Brian Roberts, and Liberty Property Trust's Senior Vice President of Urban Development John Gattuso were developing an innovative concept that would turn the building's security officers into a fusion of security officer and customer service ambassador – security ambassadors.

Allied Universal's security ambassadors offer a dual role where security and customer service are equal priorities. The concept was based on the customer service models used by five-star hotels and a leading amusement park - all known for outstanding customer service. This unique offering created a seamless partnership between Comcast, Liberty Property Trust, and Allied Universal.

"Our goal was to recruit and train a group of individuals to perform a dynamic function instead of sitting at a fixed post," said Mark Farrell, Chief Security Officer for Comcast. "It was important for us to ratchet up the customer service aspect of our security efforts. After all, Comcast is a customer-oriented, customer-friendly company."

"Our approach to this unique customer need was the security ambassadors," explained Mike Coleman, Allied Universal's Vice President of Commercial Real Estate. "This was an opportunity to take our current customer service training to a heightened level and develop a specialized position that would focus on both customer service and security."

Jim Birch, Liberty Property Trust's Senior Director of Security and Life Safety, said his organization wanted to make the Comcast Center a destination and experience for people in the Greater Philadelphia region, similar to Rockefeller Center in New York City. The ultimate goal was to offer an environment that would be well-balanced, secure, and welcoming to visitors.

**Location:**

Comcast Center  
Philadelphia, PA

**Statistics:**

- > 1,253,000 rentable square feet
- > Public park
- > Integrated entrance to rail station
- > Underground retail concourse
- > Gourmet food market



“We wanted to create a security experience that was just as focused on concierge service and a five-star atmosphere as it was on first-class security operations,” Birch said. “The feeling was that we could train people in good security concepts, but it is more difficult to teach people to be ambassadors.”

In order to accomplish the challenging task of establishing a safe, friendly, and responsive atmosphere for workers and visitors to the Comcast Center, a whole new training model had to be created and implemented. “We needed to train our security staff differently,” Farrell said. “Our challenge was to develop a specialized breed of security officer – a carefully selected and trained force of officers who could devote equal attention to security and customer service.”

Allied Universal was awarded the security contract after a rigorous competitive bidding process. Coleman led the effort to adapt the recruiting and training processes in order to develop the customized security ambassador role requested by Liberty Property Trust and Comcast. Allied Universal’s training programs already focus on customer service but for the Comcast Center, Allied Universal was creating a new role.

“This was more than the usual security assignment - we had to meet concierge and customer service-type objectives,” Coleman explained. “We needed to strike a delicate balance where the ambassadors could meet the very high customer service expectations but also not overlook the very important security role,” Coleman said.

**Challenge:** The challenges for Allied Universal were recruiting officers who met very specific criteria - those who had customer service experience and were right for the security functions, while implementing customized training programs.

“We traditionally recruit for a person who has a security background and experience. But the security ambassadors role has additional requirements. We needed people with experience in customer service and concierge work, who could create a warm and friendly rapport with visitors, yet also provide excellent security,” Coleman explained. “Our ability to develop training programs specific to our client’s needs, and our extensive recruiting efforts, positioned Allied Universal to successfully navigate through this challenge and create a specialized program.”

Recruiting and training the proper people meant the use of non-traditional tools. Allied Universal’s recruiters contacted university hospitality programs and concierge associations, posted positions on monster.com under hospitality, not security, and utilized other sources that are normally not considered when hiring security officers. Current Allied Universal officers who fit the job description were also given an opportunity to apply.

“We got a significant response,” Birch said. “We were on our way to hiring security ambassadors.”

The next phase in attracting niche recruits was to create a personality profile test that measured an applicant’s predisposition to customer service, as well as security. That was followed by one-on-one interviews with Allied Universal’s account manager and assistant account manager to reinforce the high expectations of the security ambassador’s responsibilities.

The new ambassadors participated in two layers of training. First, they received standard Allied Universal security officer training. Next, a training expert who had headed the customer service training at a major amusement park created a special course to bring their experience and concepts to Allied Universal’s security ambassadors. The training focused on the dual initiatives of security and customer service. In all, employees completed approximately 60 hours of security and customer service training.

“Once we brought the security ambassadors into the building, we had to get them to look the part of a concierge. We spent a great deal of time deciding that an attractive blue business suit with a warm color tie would help foster a positive relationship between visitors and the ambassadors. They were very proud of this look,” Birch said.

“When the building opened, our next challenge was to assist tenants, guests, and visitors understand that our security ambassadors were full-service providers. Yes, they provide security and access control to the building and offices, but they were also capable of tending to customer needs, providing architectural information about the building and answering questions about Philadelphia or any other questions visitors might have. We wanted tenants and visitors to realize that they get a whole lot more out of the ambassadors than simply ‘can I see your identification, please,’” Birch added.

Coleman said the new employees felt good about themselves. “From day one they felt empowered, had confidence and knew they were part of a special new program,” he said. “Our security officers and managers understand that this is a different type of assignment. There are many factors that elevate the status of these positions including the uniforms, location, working environment and extensive training.”

“Unlike many security contracts, the Comcast Center agreement wasn’t based on price, but on the service model delivered,” Coleman explained. “Their main objective was to staff their building with the highest level of personnel. In order to attract, train, and retain the right people, a premium wage scale was initiated and the security ambassadors also receive excellent benefits.”

Farrell said the turnover rate has been and will continue to be very low. He attributes the projected minimal turnover to the premium wages and training. “The dollars we will eventually save by paying the officers more and giving them more training is going to benefit everyone in the long run by reducing time and money spent on recruiting new officers.”

**Results:** Did all of the efforts to change the profile of a security officer at Comcast Center prove to be the best course?

“It couldn’t be any better,” Farrell said. “All of the comments we get from our Comcast employees are remarkable. There was nothing negative. Everyone’s enjoying the experience. I would say the Allied Universal security ambassadors are doing their jobs at a high level. They recognize people and they look them in the eye. They say hello, and tenants and visitors are getting personal service.”

“We have seen a return on our investment in all of the critical intangibles such as training, recruiting and forming partnerships with everyone involved,” Farrell explained. “The staff feels important and understands that they are a part of the overall success of the property. They arrive early for voluntary roll call and remain on site until they’ve briefed the next shift. The security staff at the Comcast Center is dedicated and reliable.”

What makes the ambassador’s role so important, according to Farrell, is the flexibility of it. The security ambassadors are highly adaptable and are trained to adjust to the changing needs of any situation, whether those needs fall into the customer service or security realm – or some combination of the two.

“Allied Universal is continually focused on keeping their employees engaged and excited about this program,” Farrell continued. “They are anxious to learn and continue producing a favorable image and seeing the results of their training.”

Of equal importance is the flexibility of the program. This is an evolving, living process that includes ongoing training and fine tuning as needed to ensure that the program is continually meeting the client’s needs and expectations. Management’s constant attention to the client’s goals when this program was first developed, as well as any new goals, is the key to future success.

“We got a lot of unsolicited, positive comments from people who work at other office buildings. They return to their offices saying ‘look at the benchmark the Comcast Center has set, I wonder if we can duplicate that,’” said Birch.

Allied Universal employees have also visited the Comcast Center to see first hand the positive effect of this new concept.

“The people who bring the role of the security ambassador to life, and make it what it was intended to be, have made this program a success,” Coleman added. “These officers see a real value in their positions and prove that every day by always staying focused on the top priority – the building and its tenants’ security. We’ve already witnessed the impact of our training as we are experiencing continuity of service, little turnover, strong attendance and a sense of ownership and community from the staff.”

The security ambassador program demonstrates the complex and multi-faceted role of the security officer. Many security officers are often called upon to perform other functions, whether those functions are part of their official role or not. From early in the development of the Comcast Center, it was determined that the standard officer was not exactly what was needed – and also that the usual customer service representative was not enough. The role of the specialized security ambassador has proven to be a successful mix of the two, and a winning combination for the Comcast Center.