

HOW DO THEY DO IT, YEAR AFTER YEAR?

It's amazing to see the contrasts of successful companies that dot our history to the newer companies of recent history up to today. I was astounded at the marketing genius of people like Richard W. Sears who started his company in 1886. At that time there were only 38 states and 65 percent of the population lived in rural areas. He started selling a mis-shipment of watches. He hired Alvah Roebuck as a watchmaker and later he bought into the business, hence Sears, Roebuck and Co. Guess what they offered in 1891? Free delivery and parcel post. They offered a happy alternative to the high-priced rural stores and Sears prospered.

109 years later along comes Amazon. When Amazon first launched in 1995 as a website that only sold books, founder Jeff Bezos had a vision for the company's explosive growth and e-commerce domination. He knew from the very beginning that he wanted Amazon to be "the everything store." Jeff Bezos stands out for his relentless pursuit of new markets, leading Amazon into risky new ventures like the Kindle and cloud computing, and transforming retail and growing them to the behemoth they are today. In 2013, Amazon nudged Apple off the top spot to become America's most trusted company, according to a survey by Harris Interactive. What will Bezos achieve next?

What's their secret? It's simple; they are relentlessly focused on customer service. They ask "why" every day. They are committed to one thing—their customers. If Richard Sears had not looked for opportunities every single day and looked for what his customers wanted and needed at that time, there never would have been a catalog "wish book". He was looking at the big picture, not just making money and that was marketing at its best 129 years ago.

Jeff Bezos has stated that they will approach each job with their usual tools: customer obsession rather than competitor focus, heartfelt passion for invention, commitment to operational excellence, and a willingness to think long-term. It's their number one priority. It's what helps them make the decisions on what to provide for their customers. Customers "love" them and know they provide the potential to endure for decades.

In my book, *Achieving Excellence Through Customer Service*, I expound on the value of your customer. Great leaders know that service is what your customer says it is so they stay in touch with their

markets and willingly spend the money to do so. Here are four steps to find out your customer's perception of your company.

From a customer's point of view...what business are you in? Usually you will conclude that you are in the business of providing customers with a variety of "services," even if you are not a service business, strictly speaking. Make a list. You might surprise yourself. Many service firms still do not realize that they are in the service business.

From a customer's point of view...do you have their needs and wants at heart? Identify all market segments all customer groups. It is important to determine needs and wants of all customers.

From a customer's point of view...are you listening? Set up the systems you will need for listening to customers. The way to find out what customers want is to ask them. And allow them to tell you. Make it easy for customers to communicate with the company.

From a customer's point of view...do you communicate? Be proactive and try to eliminate problems before they happen. Unless you have perfect delivery in all areas of your business, having a strategy based on delight or "wow" is not likely to pay as well as a strategy that eliminates disappointment first.

Customers are pretty simple creatures, really. Most customers will be happy if things just work, first time, easily and all of the time. Minimize their disappointments and negative surprises and it's pretty likely that you'll create happy customers.

Generating excitement, innovation, and a focus on continuous improvement like we teach, and has been used for centuries by the top companies in the world, creates a culture that's hard to build otherwise, and a true competitive advantage goes to companies that get it right.

RO

John Tschohl—described by Time and Entrepreneur magazines as a customer service guru and service strategist—is founder and president of the Service Quality Institute. He is the author of Empowerment, a Way of Life, and just released the 10th edition of Achieving Excellence Through Customer Service.

John@servicequality.com or www.customer-service.com

