

SUCCESS IS STARING YOU RIGHT IN THE FACE

You might not think so, but the most successful companies are vigorously competing for business every day. What sets them apart usually boils down to a single factor: outstanding customer service.

I've spent 44 years focusing on customer service. I've written hundreds of articles and seven books on the subject. I've been interviewed on TV and radio about it, and I've presented to thousands of customers in seminars worldwide. And no matter what business you're in, here's the advice I strongly recommend you follow.

Most companies throughout the world believe they're providing awesome service. They are addicted to advertising and marketing via expensive media campaigns. And the biggest issue I see is that they have no clue how inconsistent and weak their service really is, down at the ground level. Most companies believe they don't need any help, even though their employee turnover may be startlingly high. The solution is staring them right in the face. It's overcoming their reluctance to invest in their people and develop a genuinely customer-driven workforce.

If that sounds even remotely like your company, here are six steps I suggest you consider.

FIRST, you've got to understand that you're in the service business. Most companies think they are in manufacturing and retail – even major airlines seldom truly understand that they are in the service business. Southwest Airlines is a successful exception because they understand that they are a customer service company, and that they just happen to be in the air travel business. Customer service isn't just a critical piece of your business; you should fine-tune it until everyone knows it is your business.

SECOND, you must look at all the policies, procedures and systems you have in place that are making life miserable for your customers. You can have the nicest people in the world, but you may have stupid rules, stupid hours, and stupid procedures that are just ticking off your customers. When you make it difficult for your customers to patronize you, guess what – they'll find someone who's more accommodating. Your customers can do quite a few things much better than you can, and if your business isn't embracing this fact by viewing customer service as a marketing tool with tremendous ROI, you are doing yourself and your customers a disservice.

THIRD, you must have empowerment and speed. Every person without exception needs to be able to make fast, empowered decisions on the spot, and they'd better be in the customers' favor. Employee empowerment may be the most underutilized tool in all of customer

service. Employees know what to do, but they need to be authorized and empowered by upper management to take action and do it. No one should have to go "higher up" to get permission to help a customer.

FOURTH, you have to be more careful who you hire. The established service leaders hire just one out of every 50 applicants they interview, and sometimes it's one in a hundred. They are very, very careful when it comes to deciding who to hire. Look for the cream, the A-players, instead of bringing in the B's and C's with a vague hope that they'll grow. Identify several people in your organization that you wish you could clone. Write down their characteristics and traits, and create a benchmark for the kind of person you want to hire for each position.

FIFTH, educate and train the entire staff in the art of customer service, and give them something new and fresh every four to six months. Let's say you want to create a service culture. It doesn't matter if you have a hundred or a thousand employees, you'd better have something fresh to say, and make sure it's constantly in front of them so that when they go to work, they'll be saying, "Fantastic, I've just gotten a lot better at taking care of my customers." When management commits to customer service by daily word and deed, it breeds a culture and an infrastructure that smoothes the way for free communication within the team and beyond.

FINALLY, measure the financial results so you'll always know what impact your customer service efforts are making on your revenue, sales, profit, and market share. Everything you do should be built around the concept of creating an incredible customer experience. Perhaps the simplest way to create a service culture is by following a variation of the golden rule: Treat your customers as you wish to be treated.

MAKE your customers excited that you're in business. **MAKE** them grateful that they have the opportunity to buy your services or products. **MAKE** them feel that they are your most important customer. **MAKE** your service so outstanding that they wouldn't think of doing business with anyone else. And then... find a way to **MAKE** your service even better!

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