

Hire dogs that want to pull the sled

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Imagine, if you will, that the business you own is a dogsled. You are in a race and counting on your team of dogs to pull you and your sled across the finish line ahead of all the other racers.

The sled is your business, the dogs are your employees, and the other racers are your competitors. In order to beat those competitors, it's critical that you assemble a dog team that works well together and is committed to winning the race.

Elite racers know that building the best dogsled team begins with choosing those that work to win. The key is to find dogs that actually want to pull the sled. Not every dog likes to pull it—and not every person can excel at providing the kind of customer service you need to beat your competitors. Learn from mushers—hire for relentless performance.

What to look for in hiring staff

Customer-service professionals are made, not born, so good core attitudes are essential. You must identify and hire people who have the skills and attitudes you want and then help them learn the skills to provide exceptional—and relentless—customer service. Those people will have an instinct for talking to people and treating them with respect and concern—the foundational elements of great customer service.

Positive energy and attitude will go a long way in building a service culture within your workforce. Look for positivity, mental agility, sincerity, and creativity. Once empowered, those people will be relentless in serving your customers. It is critical that you hire people who want to drive your business, who share your goals, and are committed to driving your business. Just as not every dog wants to pull your sled, not every employee wants to do whatever it takes to ensure that your company succeeds.

In fact, Vernon Hill says, his employees use smile charts to rank applicants' attitudes during the interview process. His modus operandi is this: If there is no smile, there will be no second interview.

You can train people in the skills necessary to do the job, but you can't train them to have a great attitude; they either have it or they don't. If your employees

don't have great attitudes, they won't focus on treating your customers in a way that will increase their loyalty to your business—and that will drive your sales. A great attitude includes treating people—coworkers and customers—with respect and concern. It means being enthusiastic and sincere.

Apple is a great example of a company that has highly skilled employees who also have great attitudes. They provide valuable expertise while at the same time exuding warmth and concern for their customers and any problems they might be having. It's probably more difficult to get a job with Apple than it is to get into Harvard.

Another question is this: How do you identify potential employees who have the positive attitudes you need? The first step is to have several people conduct interviews with the applicant, which will provide you with different perspectives of applicants. Get input from others who have had contact with applicants, including your receptionist. What did she or he observe about applicants as they waited to meet with you? How did they treat your receptionist as they checked in?

During the interview, ask open-ended questions rather than those that require a simple "yes" or "no." Most applicants will tell you what you want to hear. If, for example, you ask applicants if they're hard workers, they all will tell you they are. Ask for examples of whatever applicants tell you. Probe for additional information.

Ask for examples of how they have solved customers' problems in the past. Are they empowered? Are they willing to bend or break the rules in order to provide customers with the best service possible?

Listen to what applicants tell you—and watch them as they do it. Body language is important; it can tell you much more about people than their words can do. Does the applicant convey warmth, enthusiasm, and energy? If you were a customer, would you trust this person to treat you well and solve any problem you might have?

Set high standards

I acknowledge that hiring good people in today's economic climate is

difficult, but that doesn't mean you should lower your standards. It is critical that you hire people who are self-motivated, warm, positive, enthusiastic, and energetic.

Your employees can make you or break you; the fate of your business is in their hands. Make sure those hands are capable and caring. 

About John Tschohl: John Tschohl is the founder and president of the Service Quality Institute—the global leader in customer service—with operations in more than 40 countries. He is considered one of the world's foremost authorities on customer service and recently released his latest book, "Relentless." John's monthly strategic newsletter is available online at no charge at www.customer-service.com. He can also be reached on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. For more information on John Tschohl and the Service Quality Institute, visit www.customer-service.com.

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