

THE BACKBONE OF GREAT CUSTOMER SERVICE

Most companies in today's global market have made quality and price the focus of their competitive strategy. While these elements are important, there is no more powerful competitive strategy than providing service so exceptional that it sets you and your company apart from the competition.

I can't stress enough how crucially important service is to your success. And I can't stress enough how important empowerment is to your ability to deliver great service. If you aren't empowering your employees to make decisions that will satisfy your customers on the spot, your customer service is average, at best.

Most executives believe they have empowered employees – but it's rare that they actually do, because they don't trust their customers or their employees. They believe that if they empower their employees, the customers will take advantage, and the employees will “give away the store” to keep the customers happy.

More often than not, empowering your employees costs you nothing. I recently stayed at the JW Marriott Desert Resort and Spa in Phoenix. On the last morning of my visit, I called the front desk at 10:55 a.m. and asked what the checkout time was. I was told that it was 11 a.m. I then asked if I could check out at noon.

“Yes,” the employee said. “But we'll have to charge you \$50.”

I was flabbergasted. I have never been charged for a late checkout, and I couldn't believe that people were lined up in the lobby on a Tuesday morning waiting to check in. It would have cost the hotel *nothing* to let me check out an hour late – and it would have greatly improved my opinion of the hotel, which plummeted from a 9 to a 5 because of the poor service I received.

Later, I asked the hotel if someone could take two boxes of training materials to the ballroom for me. I was told that they could, but that they would have to charge me \$20. I declined. I was struggling with my briefcase and the two boxes, when a food service employee asked if I needed help. She took my boxes, placed them on her cart, and delivered them for me at no charge. She then refused the generous tip I offered her – I had to force it on her. She went above and beyond to take care of me – and you can guess what kind of impression it left.

On average, most empowered decisions cost a company about \$25. But what too many companies don't realize is that the return on investment for that \$25 could very easily be \$1,000, because the customer will return to do business with you again and again. And they will spread the word.

You *must* empower your employees. It doesn't mean you should send them a memo saying, “You are now empowered to make decisions to satisfy our customers.” You must train your employees in using empowerment the right way. Then you have to support and recognize them when they do. Praise them publicly. Feature them in the company newsletter. It will send a message to everyone in your company that you value employees who take advantage of their empowerment not only to retain customers, but to build the customer base.

The major roadblock to employee empowerment is *fear*. Employees fear that they'll be reprimanded or fired if they take it upon themselves to give customers something that carries a monetary value. Reassure them that you support them and their efforts. Eliminate policies and procedures that get in the way of providing superior customer service. Create a culture that celebrates empowerment.

It doesn't matter what industry you imagine you are in – retail, manufacturing, banking, or (you fill in the blank). Actually, you are in the service business, and the sooner you recognize this, the better off you and your business will be. You'll be able to sit back and enjoy the benefits of having loyal customers who wouldn't dream of leaving you for your competitors.

Visit www.customer-service.com for more information on John Tschohl and the Service Quality Institute.

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John Tschohl is the founder and president of Service Quality Institute, a global leader in customer service. He is considered one of the world's foremost authorities on all aspects of customer service. His 17 training programs include Empowerment: A Way of Life. His monthly strategic newsletter is available online at no charge at www.customer-service.com. He can also be reached on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter.

