



Empowerment

The backbone of great customer service

John Tschohl ♦ Today's Restaurant Contributor

No matter what products or services you are selling, you are facing tough competition for customers. In today's global market, most companies make quality and price the focus of their competitive strategy. While those are important elements, nothing is more important that providing service that is so exceptional it sets you and your company apart from your competitors.

I can't stress enough how critical service is to the success of any company. I also can't stress how critical empowerment is to service. If you don't empower your employees to make-a-decision to satisfy your customers, on the spot, your customer service is average at best.

Most company executives think they have empowered employees. They don't because they don't trust their customers, and they don't trust their employees. They think customers will take advantage of employees and that employees will "give away the store" in order to keep those customers.

More often than not, empowering your employees will cost you nothing. Let me give you an example. I recently stayed at the JW Marriott Desert Resort and Spa in Phoenix, Arizona. On the final day of my visit, I called

the front desk at 10:55 a.m. and asked what the checkout time was. I was told it was at 11 a.m. I then asked if I could check out at noon.

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"Yes," the employee said, "but we will have to charge you \$50 to do that." I was flabbergasted. I have never been charged for a late checkout and couldn't believe that, on a Tuesday morning, people were lined up in the lobby, 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 dropped from a rating of 9 to a 5.

I had another experience at that hotel that left a sour taste in my mouth. I asked if someone could take

two boxes of training materials to the ballroom for me. I was told I could, but they would have to charge me \$20. I declined the offer and was struggling with my briefcase and the two boxes when a foodservice 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.

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

You must empower your employees. That doesn't mean sending out a memo that says, "You are now empowered to make decisions to satisfy our customers." You have to train your employees on how to use empowerment, and then you have to support, and recognize them when they do so. Publicly praise them. Feature them in your company newsletter. Doing so sends a message to all employees that you value employees who use empowerment to not only retain—but

build up—your customer base.

The major roadblock to employee empowerment is fear. Employees fear they will be reprimanded or fired if they take it upon themselves to give customers something that carries a monetary value. Ensure 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.

No matter what industry you think you are in—retail, manufacturing, banking, or _____—you are actually in the service business. The sooner you recognize that, the better off you and your business will be.

Then sit back and reap the benefits of customers who wouldn't dream of leaving you for a competitor.

About the Author: 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 all aspects of customer service and has developed 17 customer service training programs, including *Empowerment: A Way of Life*, that are used by companies throughout the world. 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.

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