EMPOWERMENT

A critical element of extraordinary customer service

Most company executives and managers think they are providing exceptional service to their customers. They see the key ingredients as speed, courtesy, respect, a personal touch that's combined with technology, and great products at great prices.

While those things are important, they fall short of providing extraordinary customer service. There is something else your employees should have in their tool boxes: empowerment. If your employees aren't allowed to make empowered decisions, everything else you do for your customers will fall by the wayside.

So, what is empowerment, and why is it so important? Empowerment means giving power or authority. It creates an environment that gives your employees the authority to make fast decisions that benefit the customer on the spot.

Empowerment isn't just about power and authority, however. It's also about responsibility – the responsibility to use authority efficiently and appropriately. Speed of thought, action, and consequence are the tools of empowered employees.

Vernon W. Hill, the founder of Commerce Bank, which he sold in 2007, and Metro Bank, which went from zero to $19.6 billion in deposits in 15 years, knew the importance of empowerment. "At traditional banks," he said, "it takes an act of God to get a fee waived." He gave his employees the authority and freedom to do the right thing for customers and shareholders.

If you are in management, you need to push empowerment every day by continuously and consistently looking for ways to reinforce and recognize empowered employees. Single them out and celebrate them during team meetings and in internal publications. This will not only motivate them, it will motivate your other employees to make empowered decisions that will drive your business.

There are four challenges company officials must overcome in order to empower their employees. Many executives don't trust the customer; they believe the customers are trying to take advantage of the company. They don't trust employees because they think customers will try to take advantage of them and they'll give away the store. They think that by empowering employees to make decisions they will lose their power. Finally, employees think it's too risky to make empowered decisions that could jeopardize their jobs.

It's management's job to remove barriers to empowerment. Eliminate policies and procedures that create roadblocks that prevent your employees from providing customer service that will have the customers singing your praise. Then give your employees clear but general guidelines so they'll have room to maneuver and think creatively when serving your customers.

Just as empowerment is critical to keeping your customers, it's also critical to keeping your employees. When you empower your employees, you let them know you value them, trust them, and support them.

When employees aren't empowered, it frustrates them – and your customers. Every time an employee must seek approval from someone higher up the ladder, it costs you money by taking managers away from the duties they should be handling. It could also drive customers to your competitors. Most frustrated customers walk out the door and don't come back.

Empowered employees not only keep your customers coming back, they save you thousands, if not tens of thousands of dollars that you'd otherwise spend on advertising and marketing. Your customers will tell their family members and friends about the wonderful service you provided them, and that kind of word-of-mouth advertising won't cost you a cent. RO

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