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Empowerment: A Critical Element of Extraordinary Customer Service

BY JOHN TSCHOHL

Most company executives and managers think they are providing exceptional service to their customers.

They see the key ingredients are speed, courtesy, respect, a personal touch 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. In fact, if your employees aren't allowed to make empowered decisions, everything else you do for your customers falls 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 employees the authority to make fast decisions that benefit the customer on the spot.

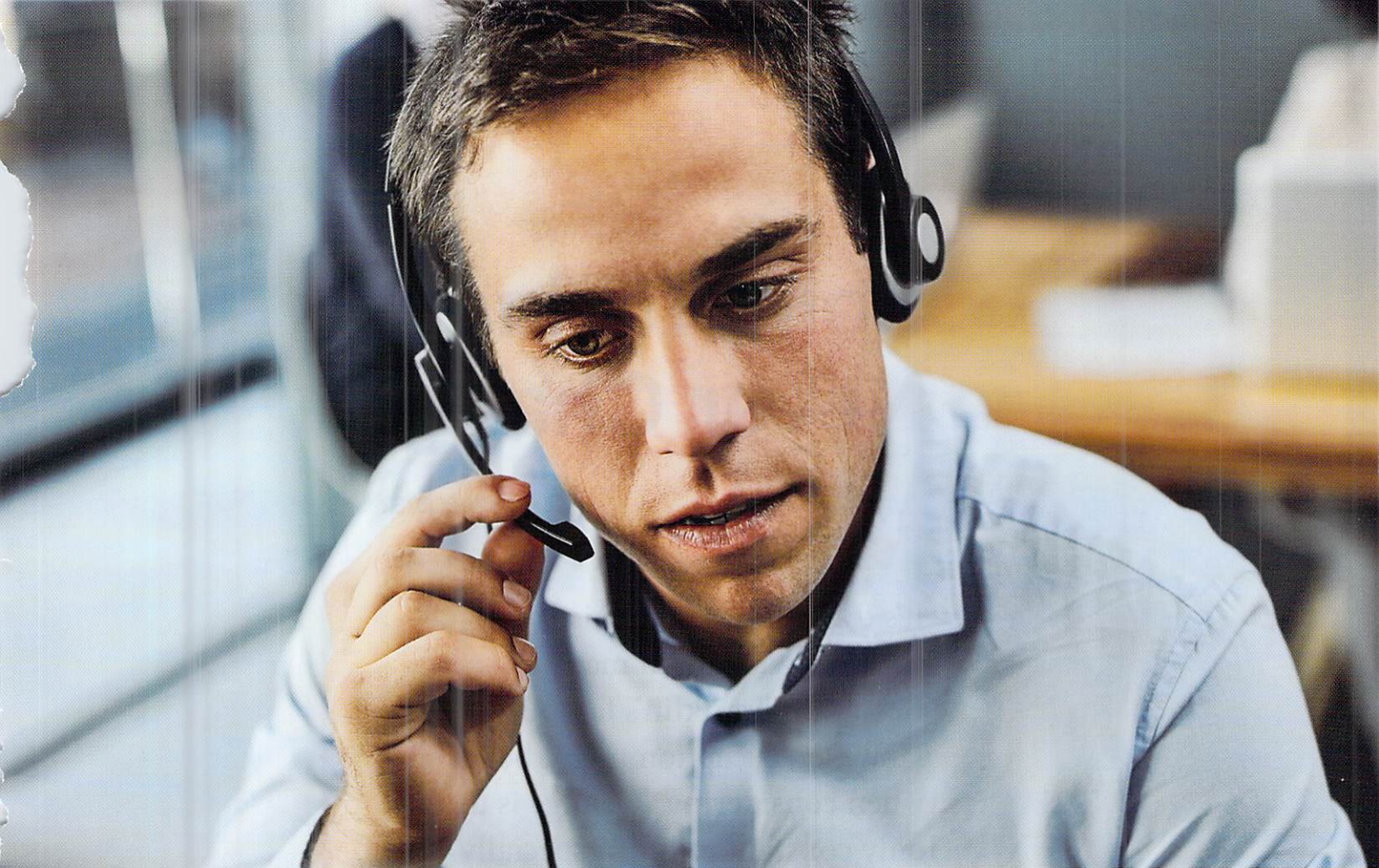
Empowerment isn't just about power and authority, however. It's also about responsibility — responsibility to use authority efficiently and appropriately. Speed of thought, action and consequence are the tools of empowered employees.

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 for 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. That 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



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executives don't trust the customer; they believe 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 give away the store. They think that, by empowering employees to make decisions, they will lose their power. And, finally, employees think it's too risky to make empowered decisions that will jeopardize their jobs.

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

Just as empowerment is critical in

keeping your customers, it is critical in keeping your employees. When you empower your employees, you let them know that you value them, trust them and support them.

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



John Tschohl is the founder and president of 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 his book and training program *Coaching for Success*. 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.

Empowered employees not only keep your customers coming back to you, it saves you thousands — if not tens of thousands — of dollars that you would otherwise spend on advertising and marketing. Your customers will tell family members and friends about the wonderful service you provide them, and that word-of-mouth advertising won't cost you a cent.

MANA welcomes your comments on this article. Write to us at mana@manaonline.org.