

Don't Hire Employees Who Don't Like People

If there is one thing a company can do to help ensure that it will attract and keep customers, it is this: Hire the right people. While that might sound like a rather simple solution, it isn't. The hiring process is crucial to the success of any organization and should be handled with great care. In the case of employees who will be dealing directly with customers, the hiring process is especially important.

At one time or another, most of us have had contact with employees who clearly do not enjoy dealing with people. They don't make eye contact, they don't smile, they aren't helpful, and they send the message that they wish you would just go away. That's bad for you, as a customer, and even worse for the company that hires them.

At Commerce Bank, if the applicant doesn't smile during the first interview, there will be no second. When Commerce, which I consider to be the most customer-focused bank in the country, opened its first four stores in Manhattan, it interviewed 3,400 people and hired only 42 of them. Southwest Airlines also hires very carefully—only one out of every 100 applicants. Other airlines think their airplanes are their most valuable asset; Southwest knows it's their employees.

I strongly believe that it is more important to hire an employee who has a good attitude and genuinely

enjoys working with people than it is to hire one who has good technical skills. Technical skills can be learned; good attitudes cannot. A bad hire could be doing irreparable damage to your business by driving your customers away from you and into the waiting arms of your competitors.

The first step in the hiring process is to develop a job description, one that includes detailed descriptions of the tasks and responsibilities you expect the employee to fulfill. Next, you must prepare for the interview. Let's face it, someone could walk into your office, feed you a great line, and walk out with a job offer. It happens every day. Those people have prepared for the interview—and you should do likewise.

Develop a list of questions to use during each interview so you get answers that are easy to compare and evaluate among applicants. Ask questions that require more than stock answers, ones that will require the applicant to share real experiences.

James Schrage, President of the Great Lake Group consulting firm in South Bend, Indiana, recommends two questions: What was your biggest failure? Can you describe a situation when you didn't get along with a co-worker and how you handled it?

Fred K. Foulkes, a Professor of Management Policy at Boston University says you should never hire

anyone after just one interview. He also recommends that you involve other people in the interview process, especially if they're going to be working with the new hire. That does two things: It gives you their input, and it gets their commitment to the success of the person you hire.

Once you have hired a person, it might be a good idea to put her on probation for three to six months. That gives you time to ensure that she is capable of doing the job before making her a permanent member of your workforce. Hiring the right people is the first step in the process. Training them and treating them well is the second. Even when you hire high-performing, customer service-driven employees, you must train them to meet your service standards—and you must do so within their first 30 days on the job.

If you hire the right people, train them, and treat them well, you will reap great rewards in the form of customer loyalty and increased profits. There is no other step you can take that will have a greater impact on your bottom line and the success of your organization. **RO**

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