

Create a Service Culture—You will be Rewarded

Superior customer service is the key to success in any organization. I've been preaching that for three decades to organizations throughout the world. It's a simple statement and one that most CEOs agree with, but they inevitably ask, "How do we do that?" My answer is this: create a service culture. It's not as difficult as you might think, but it does take commitment from everyone in the organization. And it involves training, not a one-shot training session but a series of new and exciting programs that will keep employees on top of their customer service game.

Customer service is not complicated. Customers want to be treated with warmth, respect, speed, and accuracy. They want to feel important. They want to do business with an organization that has customer-friendly policies and procedures. And they want to do business with employees who are empowered to take care of any problems they might have.

When you create a service culture, you are developing a team of employees that is committed to doing whatever it takes to satisfy your customers. At the core of that culture is the belief that no transaction is complete unless the service your customers receive is so exceptional that they wouldn't dream of doing business with anyone else.

Follow these four steps and you will create a service culture that will drive your organization—and your profits—to new heights.

Top management must believe in customer service and lead the charge. Advertising will get a customer to walk through your door or visit your web site once, but you must provide exceptional service if you want to earn their loyalty. You must be committed to service and drive that commitment strategically. You must develop management teams that are zealous about service. You must value your employees and be willing to invest the time and money to train them. If you want your employees to provide the best service possible to your customers, you must reinforce its importance. Reward those employees who go above and beyond the call to serve your customers; terminate those employees who do not. Send the message that service is critical.

Train the entire workforce. When it comes to providing customer service that will wow your customers, the most important person in the organization is not the CEO, it's the frontline employee who has constant contact with your customers. Unfortunately, this is the employee who most often is the least trained, least paid, and least appreciated. Train that employee, as well as everyone in the organization, in the art of customer service. Give them the tools they need to handle difficult situations and irate customers. When you do so, you send a message to all employees that they are valued. When

they feel valued, they will perform at their very best.

Use training tools that are fresh and new. Use a combination of print and video materials to keep employees' attention. Use role playing exercises to teach them how to interact effectively with your customers and how to deal with customer complaints. When employees are actively involved in the learning process, they will retain and use the information. Training programs must be fresh and new in order to keep employees interested and excited about providing your customers with exceptional service.

Introduce a new training program every four to six months. You can't dust off the same old training program you've used for the past 10 years and expect to change the behaviors and attitudes of your employees. It's just not possible. In order to create a customer service culture, you have to keep your foot on the accelerator. You must keep the momentum going by introducing new training programs that will challenge employees and maintain their commitment to providing the best service possible to your customers.

If you want to be a service leader and reap the financial rewards that go along with that designation, look at Southwest Airlines, Amazon.com, Costco, Banco G&T Continental in Guatemala, and Northeast Delta Dental Plans. They have created service cultures that have crushed their competition. You can compete on many levels—price, product, and quality—but it is service that will give you and your organization the edge.

Treat your customers well and they will continue to turn to you for the products and services they need. They will be loyal to you, and that loyalty will translate to increased profits. **RO**

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