

MID-IOWA BUSINESS

Employees that give a rip

During a four-week span in late 2009, I had discussions with four different business leaders who each identified a need to fine-tune the customer attentiveness of their employees. I didn't give much thought to the initial report, but as I heard the same message repeated multiple times in close succession, my ears perked up, and I started to delve deeper.

These leaders thought their organizations were decent, perhaps even good at serving customers. What gnawed at them was they realized they weren't great. The gap in performance perhaps wasn't critically apparent when business was boom-



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ing, but increased competition during the prolonged recession clearly brought it to light.

Furthermore, they acknowledged competition was likely to remain fierce going forward.

Now that they were emerging from survival mode and beginning to think once again about playing offense, they saw this as an area of strategic need.

Providing personalized service is the cornerstone to any successful

business relationship. The product or service provided has to be of high quality at a good value or the customer will go elsewhere. But what turns satisfied customers into loyal customers is how they are served and how that service makes them feel.

The following four tactics are especially effective when providing personalized service:

- Use names, both yours and theirs. No one wants to be treated like a number (unless perhaps it's No. 1). Even if the customer doesn't volunteer their name, we can generally learn it during the interaction and should use it.

- Exhibit empathy. Not everyone thinks and behaves like we do. Employees should be trained to recognize customers' potential desires, fears and concerns and know how to respond to them. Effectively learning to do this expands our market to the majority of the world that doesn't share our background or point of view.

- Make effective use of space. Break down both literal and figurative barriers that separate us from customers. Like empathy, this takes skill to distinguish what's appropriate for each customer since each will be different. Greeting the customer in their space with a firm, friendly handshake is generally a good place to start.

- Make the experience special. Let the customer know that serving them was a joy and not a chore. I recently watched a teller in an adjoining lane at my bank help a customer resolve an issue over the phone. She was smiling and even shared a friendly laugh as she worked through the problem. I don't know if the root error was caused by the bank or the customer, but, regardless, I'm confi-

dent that customer will be retained due to the service received.

So how do we best ensure that employees learn and practice these skills? Certainly training helps (and you can rest assured that, after hearing of the need four times in a month, I fine-tuned my materials). But remember what's been shared here before — training is best utilized for addressing deficiencies in skills rather than shortcomings in motivation.

In order to provide the necessary motivation and to reinforce classroom lessons, employees need to see their managers modeling the desired behaviors, providing personalized service not only to customers but also to employees. That's right; we can't expect employees to treat customers any better than they're being treated themselves.

Are you referring to your employees by the name they desire to be called? Do you understand their dreams? Their fears? Their pressures away from work? Do you meet them where they work or do they always have to come to your office to talk? Finally, do they know that you appreciate them?

If the answer to any of the above is not an unqualified "Yes!" you've got an area for improvement. By successfully addressing it, you should begin to observe employees taking better care of co-workers and customers.

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