

Myths Keep Employees From Serving

Most businesses want their employees to serve their customers and clients. But certain myths can keep businesses and employers from empowering their employees to follow through and actually make customers and clients exceptionally happy.

"Breakaway customer service is service so exceptional it moves you well ahead of the pack," said John Tschohl, founder of the Service Quality Institute of Minneapolis, MN. "Exceptional customer service is the key advantage when competing on any level in business"

Tschohl is author of "Loyal for Life: How to Take Disgruntled Customers from Hell to Heaven in 60 Seconds or Less." However, Tschohl pointed out that many employers don't realize that to provide great customer service, they must have an empowered workforce.

So... What Does an Empowered Workforce Look Like?

"Empowerment means being able to bend or break the rules -- when necessary -- to satisfy the customer," said Tschohl. There are limits. Empowerment does not mean employees can indiscriminately slash prices to retain customers.

"Front-line employees must have authority to respond to the needs and problems of individual customers with speed and courtesy... to be empowered to take the initiative... without having to wait for supervisory approval... to meet a customer's needs," said Tschohl. "Often, you have only five to ten seconds with the customer.

Tschohl cited an example of a "self-empowered" employee: A guest checks into a hotel late at night. The hungry guest asks an employee if room service is still available. It isn't, but the employee offers to go into the hotel kitchen to get the guest something to eat.

"The employee goes above and beyond the call of duty to ensure that the customer is satisfied," said Tschohl. "He displays sincere concern for the guest's comfort."

"The employee empowered himself, meaning he made a decision on behalf of the customer -- thinking of the customer first," said Tschohl.

"Employee empowerment is the most difficult element of customer service you'll try to implement," observed Tschohl, "because making empowered decisions means taking risks." Employees worry they will be reprimanded, fired, or made to pay for making what management sees as a bad decision.

Help employees overcome the mentality of "Who cares if you lose the customer... I don't want to risk losing my job" by supporting and reinforcing employees' empowered actions, said Tschohl. "Praise and applaud their actions. Reward them. Make heroes of your empowered employees."

Businesses operate under several myths, noted Tschohl.

Myth #1: One myth is that they shouldn't trust the customer. Rules and policies are developed to prevent a customer from "taking advantage" of a business. At the same time, 40 percent of customers cite lack of service as the reason they no longer do business with a company. For every complaint received, an estimated 26 people remain silent and unsatisfied. And they may tell others.

Myth #2: Another myth is... front-line employees can't be trusted. Employers fear the empowered employee will "give away the store." "What's the worst thing that can happen -- you'll get an overly happy customer?" asked Tschohl.

Customers are frustrated when told by an employee, "That's not my department." If you want satisfied customers, you must empower employees to do whatever needs to be done to meet a customer's needs, whether it's really their function or not.

"An employer's largest expense is its employee workforce," noted Tschohl. "So use your people effectively. Expect them to think, not to behave as robots. If you're hiring people not to think, why hire them? Hire a robot."

So... What Does the Art of Service Look Like?

"When we talk about the art of service, there's nothing complicated about it. It involves courtesy, integrity, reliability, helpfulness, efficiency, responsiveness, availability, knowledge, and a whole lot more. Unfortunately, many employees don't know how to provide good service," said Tschohl. "The absence of basics gets them into trouble. The hardest thing for a person to do is to use common sense, to master the basics."

Good hiring is extremely important. "The most service-driven employers may hire one out of 40 or one out of ten applicants, but they'll never hire one out of two or three," said Tschohl. Good customer service is provided by employees who project a friendly, polite, professional attitude.

Training is essential, said Tschohl. Begin by teaching employees who their customer is. "Many businesses and employees don't seem to know they're in the service business. They think they're in manufacturing, or the airline business, or the hotel business, or the insurance business. But smart firms know they're in the service business," observed Tschohl.

"I've seen organizations spend millions on advertising in an attempt to attract customers... then they use baseball bats, figuratively speaking... to drive them away -- with poor customer service," Tschohl added.

There's another advantage in empowering employees to deliver top customer service. Highly empowered people require fewer middle managers, added Tschohl. This may mean resistance from middle managers, who fear loss of control. You cut costs if middle managers can be eliminated said Tschohl. Or, time spent dealing with decisions which can effectively be made by a front-line employee can now be spent dealing with other issues, making managers more effective.