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The Customer is King

Gary Ryan Blair

Making your guests a priority pays off

Taking care of the ones who count most—the ones who pick up the tab—should be obvious, right? You'd think by now more people and companies would have gotten the message that every customer counts. Sadly, organizations that put customers at the center of the action are rare.

The pain and suffering that many companies put their customers through is disgraceful. Far too often, customers are subjected to dispassionate employees, voicemail hell and a begrudging gratitude. They feel underwhelmed, over-promised, under-served and unappreciated, which leads to a complete absence of loyalty.

Whether you're supporting the operations of a restaurant or providing services to facilities, the customer is the ultimate end user of your product or service. That's why it stands to reason that the customer is king and a company and its employees are his servants. This understanding calls for a genuine demonstration of gratitude and humility, because the better role you perform as servant, the more loyalty you garner in return.

Back to Basics

No company can exist without happy customers. Happy customers pay the mortgage, put food on the table and help put your kids through college. Loyal customers keep coming back, spend more and become powerful advocates for your cause. Enthusiastic customers make your work fun, enjoyable and purposeful. B2B means Back to Basics—a return to business fundamentals, where it's all about the customer.

The purpose of a business is to create a customer, and then to deliver sustained quality service that is benefit oriented. Profitability will follow, as profit is the naturally resulting financial measure of the value of your service—and a key success indicator.

A business must be run at a profit or it is sure to become extinct. However, when anyone tries to run a business solely for profit, then the business must die, for it no longer has a reason for existence. This skewed philosophy may bring profits today, but the benefits don't last long.

When you get beyond profitability and shareholder return, what is the ultimate value that a business and its people bring to the world?

A business is defined by the want the customer satisfies when they buy a product or service. The mission and purpose of every business is to satisfy the customer. To think otherwise is irrational. The only view that matters is the customer's; therefore, we all must step back and look at our work from the point of view of our customers and the market.

You can only create lasting value for your business by creating value for customers; you can only do that by understanding what customers value. Think like a customer, walk a mile in their shoes and you'll see that friendliness, quality, convenience, timeliness, respect and gratitude all count.

Customer-centered leadership is the cornerstone of success. Here are seven value creation strategies that will keep your customers coming back for life.

Strategy 1: Adopt a Customer Service Maxim

"Everything counts" is a maxim that sends a powerful message. It means that you see every customer interaction as an opportunity to retain a valued customer, increase your value proposition, build loyalty or

strengthen a brand. It means that everything in your business counts, from the friendly hello to the appreciative thank you, as well as every little paperclip and detail in between.

Strategy 2: Place Staff Needs Before Customer Needs

Without the right staff and proper training in place to deliver great service, other plans and programs won't amount to a hill of beans. That's why customer-focused leaders focus on employees first. Take care of your staff, and they'll take care of your customers. Leadership must put staff first, and staff in turn will put the customer first.

Strategy 3: Keep Your Promises and Honor Your Commitments

If you make a promise to a customer, keep it. If you make a commitment, honor it. The absence of this discipline is a stain on your company reputation that's virtually impossible to remove. Take your promises and customer commitments seriously because they do. Nothing annoys customers and fuels their lack of loyalty more than being lied to.

Strategy 4: Deliver Quality and Excellence

A commitment to quality and excellence breeds client loyalty. Quality and excellence is never an accident. It is the result of quality thinking and exceptional execution. Excellence creates confidence and enhances your customer's peace of mind. It functions as an insurance policy against mediocrity and an assurance of profitability.

Strategy 5: Focus on the Customer Experience

Making customers feel good about themselves and your company makes it more conducive for them to spend their money. Customercentered companies provide more than just quality and excellence, but also a rich experience.

The total customer experience—the service, the quality, the design, the brand attributes—connects on an emotional level, keeping customers satisfied and feeling well-served, as well as loyal. That loyalty can result in the capture of substantial lifetime revenue.

Strategy 6: Practice the Golden Rule

"Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." When we show kindness, respect, courtesy and humility to people, a bridge is built. Follow the Golden Rule to its logical conclusion, and you will form binding relations with your customers. If more of us practiced the Golden Rule as a consistent behavioral imperative rather than the exception, there's no telling where such kindness might take us.

Strategy 7: Go the Extra Mile

An organization's ability to motivate staff behavior that goes above and beyond the call of duty is a key asset and competitive weapon— one that is extremely difficult for competitors to imitate and virtually impossible to ignore. This advantage is realized only when you stay ahead of your customers' expectations and needs.

Talking about focusing on the customer and actually doing it are two completely different things. The companies that put customers first win much more than loyalty; they win advocates. As passionate advocates, customers will freely recommend your company to friends, neighbors and colleagues, purchase your products and services as gifts, and provide unsolicited praise or suggestions of improvement because they believe in you and want you to succeed.

The customer is king. Long live the customer. Make every customer count.

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