

Put experience into customer service to improve loyalty

A recent survey revealed that 82 percent of Americans said they're more likely to spend money with companies where they get better customer service. If logic prevails, then your company should take steps to make sure that customer service training is a top priority.

The problem is, in today's economy, where consistently good experiences are craved by customers, your everyday customer service skills training program just won't cut it. To outbehave your competition, you need to go beyond training employees on the functional aspects of their job to training them on the "experiences" your company should be delivering to truly differentiate your offering and drive more loyal customer relationships.

Recently, I began frequenting a Subway in my town where Joe, the self-proclaimed sandwich artist, would greet me with a smile and make recommendations when I seemed to be challenged with what to order. I learned to count on Joe's expertise, humor and (of course) sound advice.

Last week I stopped at a different Subway expecting to have a similar experience to the one I'd become accustomed to. The store was empty except for one customer placing an order. I got in line. When it was my turn, the employee behind the counter, with his head bowed, grunted towards me, "You need something?" I was caught off guard, expecting eye contact and maybe even a smile. In fear of making his grumpy mood worse, I smiled, placed my order, and got out of there as fast as possible. How could this experience be so different from the ones Joe had been delivering to me?

We live in an experience economy where companies that deliver a consistently good experience are rewarded with more loyal customers who go out of their way to refer others. The downside of this economy is that if you deliver a bad experience, you can expect customers to tell lots of people. And some of those, like me, will even go out of their way to speak out and write about it.

Ideally, leaders want their employees to think, speak and behave in ways that positively represent the company (the brand) and deliver experiences that at least match customers' expectations. Unfortunately,



ON PERFORMANCE

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most companies don't have an ongoing strategic customer service training program in place to teach, enable and motivate consistently good customer service.

Customer expectations are higher than ever. Why? It's not just because there are more and more companies to do business with. It's because some companies, such as Southwest Airlines Co., the Container Store Inc. and Wegmans Food Markets Inc., just to name a few, have put strategic customer service into practice and raised the bar as to what is possible. They have found ways to engage employees and get them to care about customers.

But getting employees really engaged at this level seems to be an increasingly difficult feat. Recently I was speaking to a group of CEOs at a conference and I asked participants to take five minutes to think about their answer to the following question:

What are your biggest challenges to engaging employees and inspiring them to deliver consistently good customer experiences?

Their response was overwhelmingly consistent: "We can't seem to get employees to care."

Do employees in your company "care" enough about the customer, and if so, what are they doing to consistently demonstrate how much they care?

In order to increase the "caring" in your company you need to train employees on the experience. Customer experience training is a great way to help engage employees at all levels in the company to understand customer expectations and the types of experiences they have the power to deliver. A sound training program should align management practices and employee behaviors to the company brand creating an "Experience Engine" that sets clear expectations

and fosters a culture of accountability.

An Experience Engine is an employee engagement and training approach that empowers employees and ensures greater consistency in the delivery of profitable customer experiences.

Below are the Experience Engine roles for each level in a typical company:

■ **Senior leaders** through their commitment to understanding customers' needs and wants and the company's brand, values and guiding principles rally the company around customer service as a differentiator.

■ **Managers and supervisors** make caring for employees a top priority so that employees have the training, tools and processes to deliver customers' desired experiences. In caring more for employees, employees will care more for customers.

■ **Front-line employees** deliver the company's branded experiences, ensuring customers' high expectations are met consistently. They balance the "personalized just-for-me service" experiences with the need to deliver efficient, cost-effective customer care that can be replicated consistently.

■ **Customers** provide the constant feedback to the company on the value of the experiences they receive.

There are five components of the Experience Engine to explore, integrate and align throughout each level in your company. These five components are divided into two parts: Experience Standards and Delivery Systems.

Experience Standards consist of:

1. Customer expectations: Positioning employees to walk a mile in the customers' shoes to better understand their needs, wants and expectations.

2. Your company's brand/culture: Teaching employees your company's brand/culture and their role in strengthening it.

These experience standards, once understood by employees, begin to impact the beliefs employees hold and the behaviors they will be accountable for demonstrating, which will lead to more consistent, more memorable customer service experiences.

Delivery Systems enable meeting customer expectations through the branded

experience. They include:

1. Employees: Employees are not your company's greatest asset. The right employees doing the right things are! Well-trained employees understand the Experience Standards and become proficient in basic customer service skills.

2. Setting: The unspoken messages that customers hear or see (whether on the phone or in your store/office) have a sensory impact on their experience. Training employees to see the environment from the customers' viewpoint reinforces alignment with customer expectations and promotes more consistent, positive experiences.

3. Processes: Processes should support

employees and the physical environment by eliminating service barriers. Employees must be trained to use and improve processes to ensure the Experience Engine is running smoothly.

Leaders who put the Experience Engine in place and train staff on how to deliver experiences, rather than simply job tasks, will involve employees in ways that make a measurable difference. Joe's manager at Subway obviously knows this. It's why his employees aren't sub makers, but sandwich artists eager to recommend and create culinary concoctions for customers.

This engine also fuels the consistent passion and engagement that will help em-

ployees in your company care more about customers and take greater pride in delivering the experiences that will truly delight, leading to higher customer satisfaction, loyalty and sales, as well as beneficial experiences for everyone.

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