

## Keys to keeping customers in good times and bad

**A**s a small-business owner, I'm accustomed to focusing on numbers. Did we hit the goals for the month? Were we able to improve sales? Did we increase profits?

While I know it's important to keep a close tab on financial metrics like these, in the last few months, I've seen owners turn numbers into an hourly obsession, as they watch the stock market fluctuate, banks tighten lending and consumer confidence waver.

This anxiety is prompting more and more owners to ask what they can do to bring greater stability to their business in order to ride out the recession and ensure their company comes out on top.

As a business leader, ask yourself, which would you really rather have today: A healthy economy or the ability to replicate your best employees and the experiences they deliver for your customers?

This might seem like an odd question, but in a down economy it is more important than ever to define expectations for employees, communicate effectively and hold everyone accountable to deliver the results that keep your business going.

My business partner and I did these critical activities when we purchased Buckman's Bakery & Ice Cream. In the 1970s, Buckman's was the local destination for homemade, old-fashioned ice cream and the best cakes, pies and doughnuts. By the 1990s, however, the perception of Buckman's had dramatically changed. Competition from all fronts—ice cream parlors, doughnut shops, bagel bakeries and supermarkets—had eroded its market share, and the store had lost its uniqueness. In fact, the business seemed oblivious to its customers' desire for a meaningful experience and was losing upwards of \$15,000 per month.

When we took the business over in the early 1990s, it was on the verge of bankruptcy. We both were alarmed at the filthy conditions within the more-than-7,000-square-foot facility, but even more shocked by the staff—generally lazy, unkempt, rude and careless—who were delivering bad experiences, one customer at a time.

Why did we invest in such a difficult, competitive environment? During our research



### ON PERFORMANCE

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into the viability of the bakery, we discovered a feeling of nostalgia that customers associated with Buckman's—a feeling they wanted to share with new generations, despite the current state of the business. We knew that if we could change the customer experience, we could restore Buckman's into a hot-spot destination. But before we could change the customer experience, we needed to change the employee experience and the expectation for what Buckman's customer service should look like.

What we accomplished wasn't rocket science, but it sure worked. Here are the steps we took:

1. We clearly defined a customer service strategy based on the experience we knew our customers wanted, and then drafted a concise service vision.

2. To make the vision meaningful to employees so they could buy in to it, we translated it into a behavioral expectation framework consisting of 15 behaviors. These behaviors became our non-negotiable standard for all customer service employees—they had to do them all the time to ensure customers would always have "The Buckman's Experience."

3. Then we integrated these behaviors into key performance processes. This included making "The Buckman's Experience" a part of our employee training, our hiring procedures, our performance evaluation process and even our "Super Server" employee recognition program, which not only further engaged employees, but allowed us to show our appreciation for good performance.

Once the framework for driving accountability was in place, we turned our attention to eliminating the products that our expert baker, Tim, couldn't guarantee would always be great. Gone were the cakes, pies,

bread and pastries that were once staples, and in were the things we knew most customers wanted. From that moment, doughnuts, muffins and ice cream became the three core products of "The Buckman's Experience."

In taking these steps, we were able to design and implement world-class employee and customer experiences in a very short time period that dramatically increased the value of the business and Buckman's differentiation in the market. In fact, we became known for consistently great service.

Here is just one example: The second time an employee saw the same customer come in, he had to ask the customer's name and remember what they ordered. This enabled employees to have more friendly exchanges with customers on repeat visits. I know this sounds simple, but we didn't leave this requirement up for interpretation. Employees knew these behaviors were non-negotiable for the job. This was discussed when they were hired, when they were trained on how to do it, and in the tools we provided such as cards for jotting down customer names and product preferences.

By establishing reasonable behavioral and experiential expectations, our employees became accountable to us and to each other. And, because they liked working in an environment where accountability was valued, Tim and I never had to post a job opening for a customer service position. Our staff became so loyal to our approach of defining expectations and ensuring accountability that they would refer only their best employee leads. As a result, we were able to hire great people, even at minimum wage.

Think about it: Staff would never recommend friends who wouldn't be good workers, because it would be the kiss of death—it reflects poorly on them. So they only referred friends that they were confident would be as great at keeping the store clean and the customers happy as they were.

In re-establishing the Buckman's brand from the inside out and taking the time to make work more meaningful for employees, we were able to attract and retain the brightest staff when our competition was struggling to find help. Also, we were able

to create a buzz in the industry and around town, as our customers began to talk about the clean store, great food and energetic employees who treated them with care and respect. They loved being remembered every time they came in. They loved “The Buckman’s Experience”!

In three short years after taking on the bakery, Tim and I sold Buckman’s for more than 10 times what we paid for it. And, we did it by focusing on the one thing we could control that would most impact our growth—replicating our best people.

In the years ahead, there will be three things that will most impact the growth of your company. Unfortunately, two of them

are completely beyond your control:

1. The economy. It’s ugly right now and you can’t control what happens next.

2. Your industry. You’re just one small part of the segment so you have minimal impact.

However, the third thing you have total control over, and I think by now you know what it is:

3. Your employees. You totally control this, so you can replicate your best employees to drive experiences to a new level.

Make no mistake. It doesn’t matter if the economy is booming or if it’s a bust. You will win more and lose less if your employees stay consistent with delivering the experiences

that customers value most. In turn, customers will thank you by providing their loyalty and by going out of their way to promote your business and share their experiences. And, by the way, so will your employees!

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