

Don't let customers pay for apathetic, disengaged workers

We're on the verge of an apathy and lack-of-engagement decade.

Consider these staggering statistics: In 2009, Gallup Inc. found that only 30 percent of employees were engaged at work, 52 percent were not engaged, and 18 percent were disengaged to the point of working against their organizations' goals.

In addition, research conducted by my firm, Brand Integrity, shows that nearly 80 percent of leaders feel employees do not consistently demonstrate drive, energy and a focus on results. Supporting this, we've found that 70 percent of leaders do not believe employees are as committed as they should be to growing the business and increasing sales.

Why should you care? Because too many employees are unhappy at work, and customers are paying for it. Have you experienced this cost? Are you, as a consumer, paying for a lack of engagement and people who are unhappy at work? Are you frustrated with the inconsistency of the experience (or lack of experience) you have? Unhappy consumers are less loyal, harder to sell to, and simply not as profitable for businesses.

It's common sense in business today that the cost of acquiring a new customer is significantly greater than that of retaining an existing one. Doesn't it make sense that we begin to apply the golden rule of life to customer service? Treat customers as you would want to be treated! While this may seem obvious, that doesn't mean it comes naturally to you, your colleagues or the employees of the businesses you frequent. Unfortunately, common sense is not always common practice. Here are a few personal experiences to demonstrate the reality of attitudes and actions portrayed by business owners, managers and employees:

I walked into a convenience store to be greeted at the register by a large sign: "We're happy to serve you when you're not on your phone." Really! Am I a customer, or are you doing me a favor by allowing me in your store? Yes, there are a few obnoxious cell phone users out there (and you know who you are). Let's assume they're



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2 percent of customers. This store owner or manager decided to send an insulting message to all customers to make a point to those few.

The next day I visited Pottery Barn for Kids to purchase a gift certificate. At the counter I was (not) greeted by a female employee in the middle of a phone conversation. She didn't say anything, just kind of looked at me. I requested a \$50 gift certificate. She proceeded to package it up, all the while continuing her dialogue. She even used a hand gesture to signal for me to sign the credit card receipt. She ended her call just as our transaction was complete, so I mentioned it must be difficult to take care of two customers at once. Her response: "Oh that was just a friend."

Pottery Barn is a high-end retailer. I'm quite sure it doesn't teach that kind of behavior as part of its customer service training.

Think about this: An unengaged worker cannot create a loyal customer. Employee engagement and the customer experience are directly correlated. My two examples represent actions indicative of an unengaged work force. But what about the opposite?

Here's an example of how a company can "outbehave" the competition, simply by having employees act as if they want the customer.

I entered Dunkin' Donuts and was greeted by Jeff: "Welcome. What can I get for you today?"

I placed my order.

"Great! So easy I can make that myself. Let me get that packed up so you can get on your way. Thank you for coming. Have a great day."

Jeff had waited on me a few times before

this encounter. He's consistently friendly and customer-focused. That's why I go there. On this last occasion, I asked Jeff if he wouldn't mind sharing the reasoning behind his approach to customer service.

"I like to treat people like I want to be treated. It's not rocket science; it's common sense," he says. "We try to teach this to all employees. The problem is that it is not something easily learned. You either have a knack for it or you don't."

"If it's in you, you'll do it," he adds. "If not, you'll do it sometimes, but it won't be genuine and customers will know it. I get a kick out of making people happy. I hope it becomes contagious to those around me. When it does, everyone starts moving a bit faster, smiling a bit more and providing better service."

Jeff and his team at this particular Dunkin' Donuts recognize that they are on stage every minute at work, responsible for orchestrating a welcoming and fast experience. They raise the bar, and that is paying off. Jeff shared that his store is consistently recognized as one of the highest volume and most profitable stores. Are you surprised?

As we move into 2011, what is your company doing to avoid falling victim to apathy and lack of engagement? Ultimately, a company's leader is responsible for creating the service culture that produces a positive customer experience. To get employees to orchestrate consistently good customer experiences and outbehave the competition, a company must do three things very well:

- Set expectations with employees for the non-negotiable behaviors required to live the brand and deliver service that customers want and deserve.

- Communicate behavioral expectations by capturing successes and sharing them each week.

- Establish a culture of accountability for living the brand every day by conducting behavior assessments. Have employees rate how consistently they do each of the non-negotiable behaviors that create a good customer experience, and track progress over time.

The reality is that today's challenging economic times are having a profound impact on employee engagement and their happiness level at work. Leaders, how long will you let your customers pay for it? As consumers, how long are you willing to pay for poor service before becoming less loyal and taking your business elsewhere?

For more information on how to engage employees, getting them more focused than ever on delivering your branded experience, visit www.BrandIntegrity.com and click on Behavior Management Explained.

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