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Employees First: The Key to Great Customer Service

Building a brand starts from within.

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Conventional business wisdom holds that successful companies always put the customer first. To be sure, the entire realm of customer relationship management is based solely on this one simple truism.

I believe differently. I believe that building a brand that wins the hearts and minds of customers starts from within, by cultivating your own employees. Why? Because you cannot build loyalty within your customer base unless your own people have developed the passion and commitment to help earn it from them. Great customer service starts with employees who are committed to the cause and feel empowered to make decisions in the best interest of your customers.

Putting employees first means building a company culture that allows employees to be the best they can be. Traditional ventures like tuition reimbursement, ongoing training and promoting from within are just the tip of the iceberg. The most successful companies also keep the lines of communication open. They share the good and the bad with their employees in terms of company performance. They treat employees as individuals, using a personal touch in acknowledging major life milestones or just a job well done. And they foster a spirit of fun

and camaraderie. How can employees turn in a lackluster performance if they feel they are letting their coworkers down?

I remember reading in a book by Bill Marriott that the seven most important words delivered by a leader to his team are: "I don't know. What do you think?" This has proven repeatedly to be some of the best advice I've ever come across. A smart CEO may have phenomenal instincts and know the answers to 80 percent of the questions that come up. But a good leader has the tact and patience to let the answers emerge from other people. This method gives them pride of ownership. They feel like they share in the decision-making and are vested in the outcome. This "buy-in" is essential to having them take up the torch and carry through with commitment. And very often, the right answers emerge from people who are closest to the situation and have the keenest perspective on how to improve customer interactions.

Your Secret Weapon: Employees

In my experience, investing in your employees -- your most valuable asset -- pays off in bottom-line returns. I call the relationship between employees, customer loyalty and profitability the "Circle of GrowthSM." Investing in your people leads to happy employees who feel good about what they are doing and telegraph that feeling

to customers. Those positive vibes translate into customer loyalty. A loyal following drives profit back into the business. Those profits are then reinvested into people, and the cycle starts again. The key to initiating the Circle of Growth in your organization is building the kind of corporate culture that increases employee loyalty -- and thus profitability. Customer loyalty is the foundation for building a brand, which I define as the promise of delivering a consistently positive customer experience.

A study last year in the *Harvard Business Journal* supports this concept. Researchers concluded that "if you invest in improving your employees' view of your firm's corporate character, those positive attitudes will rub off and boost customers' opinions of the company. That will drive growth. It sounds simple, but too many organizations focus on what customers think -- to the exclusion of what employees think."

Remember, your employees are the ones who deliver on your brand. By investing in your workforce and helping employees be the best they can be, they can deliver the level of service that keeps your customers coming back for more.

About the Author

Paul Spiegelman is cofounder and CEO of The Beryl Companies, the nation's leading healthcare-exclusive customer-interaction center, located in Bedford, Texas. Beryl was selected as the #2 best medium-sized company to work for in America by the Society for Human Resource Management and included in the Inc. 5000 in 2007. You can find out more by visiting www.beryl.net.