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Treat Customers Special

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Every leader knows that customer service can save and make his firm money. Every consumer knows what it's like to get great customer service; when we do, we wonder why it's the exception and not the rule.

Here's how companies can make it the rule:

Decide who you are. Change your company culture and "commit to being extraordinary so your customers walk away saying 'wow,' and then come back and bring a friend," said Donna Cutting, author of "The Celebrity Experience: Insider Secrets To Delivering Red-Carpet Customer Service."

Expect nothing less. Cutting lauds Starbucks (NASDAQ:SBUX) for inspiring its people give top customer service. "Get your employees excited about that vision and expect it from every single employee," she told IBD.

John Wood, CEO of Hub Plumbing & Mechanical in Massachusetts, says he knows within 30 days if an employee will help customers the way he expects. Those who don't either leave or get the ax.

Set an example. Wood promises his customers that he is available for them around the clock. He even has a live person answer the phone at all times. That, he says, gives his firm a boost over the competition.

The Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center in Nashville, Tenn., goes in this direction: It offers employees quarterly bonuses for those who garner good customer service scores.

Say yes. Customers want to hear that. "Train your employees in terms of saying yes to the customer and figuring out how to do it," Cutting said.

Scott Graham, CEO of Xtreme Personal Assistant Concierge Services in Newport Beach, Calif., says that when customers ask, his company will deliver as long as it's moral, ethical and legal.

Tabitha Health Care Services makes a habit of saying yes.

"The thing about Tabitha is that we are never satisfied," President Keith Fickenscher of the Lincoln, Neb., firm told Cutting. "Additionally, we're teaching our 700 employees ... not to say no, but instead to ask how."

Listen to each customer. Some customer service people spend so much of their day answering the same questions and hearing the same requests, they neglect to notice when they're being asked something different.

That can lead to customers ordering food a certain way, only to see it land the same way the restaurant always serves the item. It's like nobody is listening.

"Don't be on automatic pilot," Cutting said. "Listen to exactly what the customer is saying, and then take ownership of whatever the problem, question or concern is until it's followed through to completion."

What Cutting learned is that customer service comes down to where companies want to allocate their time and money.

"You can spend your time cleaning up messes and/or you can spend your time delivering an experience for your customers that is so extraordinary, so unusual in today's customer service world and so exciting that the payoff will be they will start telling other people," she said.

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