

People Are Your Business

By Jeffrey Schmedeke

We live in a viral media age. This fact was made acutely apparent to managers, stockholders and staffers at Comcast in July of this year. If you have not heard about the incident, please read on.

A customer (who just happened to be V.P. of Product at AOL) called the Comcast call center requesting disconnection. What ensued was a call center harangue about how that was a mistake. The customer repeatedly stated that he didn't feel he had to give a reason for stopping service. The call center employee, who most assuredly had been trained to retain or upsell service, would not give up. For eighteen minutes, the Comcast representative cajoled, antagonized and otherwise harassed the customer. The last eight minutes of the interaction were recorded and posted on Twitter to incredulous reactions from followers.

To most business leaders, understanding the value of developing their people is inherent in their everyday decision-making. Despite this pervasive consensus, we've all experienced customer service that we wish we could forget. To reach beyond the prosaic, I want to illustrate a counter example that describes a different paradigm in business thinking.

Online shoes and other goods retailer, Zappos, has a mission. Most organizations do. But, theirs is not to sell shoes or clothing. It's to serve their customers. That means Zappos call center employees help with anything. If someone were to call in about finding a dry cleaner in downtown San Francisco, you can bet a Zappos call center rep will hop on a search engine to find that information. One could call this the Boy Scout method of customer service. Though Zappos employees will take a stand with unhappy customers, it probably won't involve alienating them through poor incentives and communication stifling scripts provided for the call center staff to read to the disgruntled.

Customer service is the new marketing in the age of viral media. Every customer interaction with the staff is an interaction with the brand. Witness that the AOL V.P. described here has 90,000 Twitter followers; he tweeted out the recording of his Comcast experience minus the call center representative's name. Lest we blame the representative, it would be a good bet that his company training created the psychology that fueled his behavior.

To improve internal psychology, the workforce needs constant maintenance and "thought" upgrades in the form of learning. To be sure, the wrong kind of concepts and tools can also be learned to the detriment of morale and, ultimately, the bottom line. In order to get to a people-service place internally, business leaders should seek out high quality, interoperable skills training for those who move the company. The adage rings true: You don't build a business. You build people, then they build the business.

What could Comcast do? One, don't apologize for a "rogue" employee. He was behaved exactly as he was trained. Two, figure out how to make customers love the brand by shifting the thinking to one of deep service and empathy. Three, retain highly talented customer service staff by making sure they have a stake in the creative process of customer interaction.

To make these happen, Comcast should first seek out the best in communication, leadership and customer service training. Thankfully for them, there is a wide variety of concepts and ideas available.

One of my favorites (and for which there are many variations on theme) was codified by the late Stephen Covey. Twenty-five years ago, his Seven Habits became part of the professional lexicon. Among those seven are the larger frameworks of Dependence, Independence and Interdependence. In a nutshell, Dependence is about surviving by conforming to norms. Independence is about achieving personal goals by applying rational thinking and self-learning. Interdependence is about arriving at the wisdom of the interconnectedness of everything.

The V.P. at AOL understood Interdependence. He worked with Comcast to ensure its representative was not fired. Now let's hope Comcast begins to recast its company culture toward a different paradigm that builds its people with genuine service and empathy. This is the essence of interdependence as expressed negatively or positively in viral media messages.

I can imagine a day when a positive customer interaction goes viral. Can you?