

If They Can See It - They Can Do It

By: Michael H. Seid, Managing Director, Michael H. Seid & Associates, LLC

The easiest, most profitable and absolutely the most enjoyable way to run a business is through the delivery of not just great customer service, but the kind of customer service legends are built upon. And yet, one of the most troubling observations I have made is the inability of management and staff of some retailers and service providers to understand what true customer service is all about.

We tend to focus on the recognized geniuses of customer service, the Nordstroms, The Sewell Village Cadillac's, The Disney Organization and regale in their ability to do "it" better. "It" is not their systems and procedures in delivering customer service but is far more basic. "It" is their foundation, their culture and whatever philosophical root which makes it uncomfortable for the least of their staff to do it any other way. "It" gives them the confidence to empower their teams to greatness. Most important, achieving "It" is not that difficult once we understand what "It" is.

Picture an imaginary dot on the wall. Within the dot is your product and services and holding the dot together is the passion, the enjoyment and the thrill of servicing the customer. Focus on the dot, and place it on every act you contemplate or do, because it is all that is truly important. Unfortunately, it is the rules and the codification of the dot which tends to weaken it. For when we try to define it, and put it in writing, and disseminate it though out the system, we tend to limit it and only achieve what we were able to encode. And that - is rarely enough.

To begin the process, you must listen. Not to me and not to your staff because none of us are your customer. It is your customer who is the genius. He is the only one who can determine your success. And yet, when customer service systems are designed, often it is the customer who no one ever asks.

I look at the process of determining what customers want the same way I look at a circle. There is not beginning and there is no end. The process just starts and continues.

Creative listening takes on many forms and each is incomplete in itself. As we add new methods of customer espionage we begin to understand how to distinguish ourselves from the competition.

Listen to your customers. Learn to love survey cards and focus groups because behind the anonymity of the survey and the darkened glass you will hear your customers and those of your competitors talk of their needs and desires. Be brave, because it is in their honesty that your future resides. Anticipate regional differences because customer service expectations can vary greatly from market to market. But, always take the higher standard as increased customer service in markets that don't expect it will

increase customer response.

Don't be satisfied with the results. This is a process which is ongoing and is never complete. Let an outsider, skilled as a facilitator, conduct the focus group sessions. If you sense the facilitator has a bias toward you in the sessions, change facilitators. You are after the truth, not a boosted ego.

Learn to listen as your customer. Listening as your customer takes on several forms. My two favorites are by telephone and in person.

Telephone your locations as a customer. What do you hear? Hopefully your call was answered quickly and hopefully you weren't put on hold. These are the obvious hopefuls. There is more you should expect when you listen to the conversation as your customer would. Ask questions about products and services. Did your staff realize the opportunity of the call? Did they realize that when you asked questions you might be a new customer, unfamiliar with not only what you asked but what you didn't ask - your hours, your services, your locations and anything else that might draw you in. As hokey as it sounds, and as often as I have heard it said, did you see the enthusiasm, the pride of the organization, the thrill of service jump out at you through the telephone?

Tape the call. There is no better way to explain the opportunity to your staff and to the person you spoke with than letting the person hear what they said. It is the greatest of telephone training tools.

Visit your locations as would a customer. The under use of shopping services is startling. Everyone is on their best behavior when management is in the location. The trick is not to let them know you are watching. Shopping services see your operations as your customers do. They can be one of the best ways to let your team know what is important by rewarding the best of them for what they did best for a customer. Never focus on the negative. Reward them for greatness. Professional shopping services are often the best because they are trained to report back to you. If budgets are restrained I have used teachers, flight attendants, nurses and other service professionals as mystery shoppers instead of the professional shopping services.

It is not the method, but the message. Let the research drive the visits and the positive findings drive the organization. Over time they will understand. You are seeking to change and establish a customer service culture not simply a new set of rules to put in a manual.

Steal from your competitors. This takes the internal fortitude that comes from knowing you need to improve and your competitor is doing "It" better. Stealing is the cheapest method of improvement. Never be afraid to become brilliant by stealing your competitors methods. And never be afraid to imitate their changes, when they are right. Who remembers, and who cares, two months from now, or even two days from now, who was the originator of an idea. As long as it works, use it.

Listen to your franchisees and their managers. Why are unit volumes, average tickets, repeat customers percentages higher in some locations than in others? After all, it is

the same franchise system operating under the same operating rules, isn't it? No it's not. The difference is the passion toward the customer. Let the best tell you why they are the best, even when their location is not, or their market isn't the strongest or the biggest. They are in the trenches and touch the ultimate customer every day.

Define your customer. Forget for a minute defining your customer by their demographics or psychographics. The customer is much easier to define. Each level of the organization has it's own customer and as management it is your responsibility to focus each level of the organization to provide passionate service to it's customer.

If you are the franchisor, your customer is your staff and your franchisee. Your staff's customer is the franchisee, the suppliers and other members of the team. Your franchisee's customer is the ultimate consumer. The bottom line is, determine who is the customer, and at every level make certain that they are served. Always focus the goal at the ultimate consumer but make the entire process, from the franchisor down through every level of the organization a passion of customer service. And remember the true golden rule, when all else fails, forget the rules and service the customer - who ever they may be.

And don't forget the process of improvement. Listen creatively. Do it and do it often. Follow through because it is the through the follow through the process begins to work. Involve the most senior of your team as well as the most junior in searching out what your customers need and to uncover their hidden messages of what will make them happier. This is the opportunity of a lifetime.

All of the research methods available, and there are many, will not establish great customer service. When it comes to the kind of customer service that legends are written about remember, If they can see it - They can do it. Its the dot again. Make customer service the fabric of the dot, at every level of the process. Become more than customer focused, become customer driven. Once you become passionate about the customer, and it becomes part of your company's culture, the rest is easy. Your staff, suppliers, franchisees and their staff will instinctively know it, even if you forgot to write a rule about it.