

# Customer Care and Employee Care Go Hand in Hand

By JoAnna Brandi

I just returned from speaking at another Inc. Magazine Conference on Customer Service Strategies. I enjoyed three days of learning and networking with some of the best and the brightest minds in the field, and in the entrepreneurial community. There was one thing in particular that was so rewarding for me this year. The absolute recognition and affirmation in almost every session that I attended that *without creating an environment where the workers feel valued and good about coming to work, you cannot even hope to deliver a level of service that will build true customer loyalty.*

Well it's about time. Isn't it? Wasn't it ludicrous to believe that we could ask workers to care about customers if they didn't feel cared about? Isn't it crazy to think that we can ask people to take "ownership" of the customer and the customer's problems if we don't take ownership and create a workplace where people can feel their sense of self-worth grow and where they can learn and develop as people as well as performers?

Creating an environment where both customers and employees want to pledge their loyalty is a function of good planning as much as good intention. As companies begin to compete for qualified personnel (like they are now competing for customers) we all need to get better at developing and keeping talented staff. Losing talented employees costs you money and often costs you customers.

As long as the economy remains good, the challenge to find qualified, "good" people will get tougher. If you are hiring technical staff or knowledge workers, you are already feeling the pinch and it will get worse. What can you do to assure that you are building the type of workforce that will help you create loyalty, internally and externally? Here is a short checklist for creating a workforce that will help you grow your business.

## HIRE RIGHT

Most companies don't put the time in up-front to understand what kind of people thrive in their cultures and the kind of people they need to take good care of customers and to grow the company. Develop a profile of the kind of person that succeeds in your company. Know specifically what kinds of attitudes and skills serve your customers best. For some positions (like teleservices or sales) it may make sense to do some testing. After all, some things, like empathy, a key customer caring skill, cannot be taught. Learn the latest in behavioral hiring techniques and make sure everyone who interviews know what they are. Make sure the applicant gets interviewed by a number of people. Prepare well for interviews by talking to other members of the hiring team and writing down key interview questions. Check references.

## ORIENTATION

This is where most companies really fall short. It's not enough to show someone the rest rooms, the accounting department and the cafeteria and then show them to their department. Companies that deliver world-class service (even the small ones) have a formal orientation program, an employee handbook and a variety of ways to introduce the new employee to the company. During the orientation an employee is told clearly what the company (and the department) expects of them. They are told the kinds of things they need to do to succeed and even the kinds of things they would need to do to be fired. The standards of the company are clearly articulated, and a

good teacher/trainer will share examples of how those standards are implemented in day to day life. This is the time to explain the impact of certain behaviors on the customer, and the companies philosophies and belief systems regarding the customers.

## TRAINING

Every one needs to know what is expected of them. The clearer the job description and the clearer the expectations are articulated the better a new hire's chance for success. Don't "throw people in the water and see how well they swim". That old management technique sets people up for failure, not success. Train everyone in the company in "recovery skills" - the art of dealing with an angry or distressed customer. Know that today's workers expect you to provide them with more than just the training to do their job, but also on skills that are transferable and help grow them professionally, such as computer, communication skills, and interpersonal skills. Training pays you back. Most companies do not do enough of it.

## CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE PEOPLE CAN BE HEARD AND CAN PARTICIPATE.

The key relationship skills in business today have to do with building trust, respecting others ideas and opinions and communication honestly without blame or judgment. People want to make a difference and make a contribution. If you want them to care about the customers you have to care about them. Younger people especially want to have fun at work. The generation formerly called "X" (they don't like the moniker, so will someone please come up with something that works?) have different values and don't want their father's workplace!

Just as customer loyalty is critical to the long-term success of your business, so too is employee loyalty. Start today to look at the systems you have set up to support your growth in the future. As always, Dare to Care (sm)!

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