

## **HR Drives Customer Service**

**By Ira Wolfe**

The great writer Robert Frost once said, "Isn't it a shame that when we get up in the morning our minds work furiously – until we come to work."

I can't help thinking that Mr. Frost must have been the victim of a really bad customer experience when he said this. I wonder what he'd say today! The contrast between exceptional and horrible service is just remarkable these days.

Last week during lunch I asked my waitress to refill my coffee cup. That seemed like a simple request. Several minutes later I asked again. A few minutes later, I asked a third time. Each time the waitress acknowledged my request. In return I received a few glares but never my coffee.

Just a few hours later, my mother asked me to accompany her to the dentist. She called at 3:30 PM to check if the doctor was on time for her 4:00 PM appointment. No one answered. She called again. Still no one answered. Finally the receptionist returned her call and recommended she come after 4:30. At 6:15 she was seated.

By contrast, I flew to Florida on Southwest Airlines. Once considered the no-frills airlines with their "cattle-herding" first-come seating and peanuts substituted for meals, nearly every competitor has cost-cut their way down to Southwest's level of service. While they matched with deftness fare cuts and peanut-for-peanut, they have not been able to match service quality. In the meantime nearly all of Southwest's competitors have gone bankrupt or just became names in the history books. Southwest instead has enjoyed 32 years of consecutive profitability and is consistently honored as one of America's most admired businesses. They own the number one slot for fewest customer complaints and consistently receive awards for customer loyalty.

What makes Southeast Airlines so different? Much of the credit has to go to the leadership of founder and former CEO Herb Kelleher. Kelleher's strategy was simple: competitors can cut costs. They can provide excellent service. But what they can't do is duplicate the inspiration that creates a culture. Kelleher believes "spirit comes from the heart, not the head." Creating a culture where people are truly the greatest asset isn't a human resource program or a marketing slogan printed on banners but a way of living and doing business. Customer service isn't something you train people to do. It is what they do because they want to do it.

Walk into any business meeting or networking event with business owners and managers and you'll likely hear how difficult it is to find "good" employees. Maybe that's because all the good employees want to work for Southwest Airlines and companies like it. While thousands of business struggle to fill vacancies and retain employees, Southwest Airlines received 225,985 resumes in 2004 and hired only 1706 of them.

Other businesses can learn a lot from Southwest. First you can create all the strategic and business plans you want but results will come from what Kelleher refers to as "audacious commitment": putting employees first, customers second, and shareholders third. By treating employees well, customers will come back, and that's what makes shareholders and owners happy.

Southwest's business is people. Southwest's mission statement is simple – it deals solely with people. That hasn't changed from 1971 when they employed just a few dozen employees to today's employee base of over 31,000. Southwest values their people as people, not employees. Southwest employees understand people is its business and they buy into it.

Management at Southwest understands that not every candidate has the spirit or skills to fit into the culture. They know a particular personality fits into their culture and they don't compromise

hiring and retention under any circumstances. This is amazing because in spite of being over 80 percent unionized, Southwest airlines enjoys a very collaborative relationship with labor.

What can you learn from Southwest? To differentiate yourself from the competition, stop giving just lip service to customer excellence. Customer excellence starts with a focus on people, first your internal employees, then your external customers. Set the bar high for employees; hire candidates who fit the culture and don't make excuses for delivering anything less than exceptional customer service.

"Don't ever doubt in the customer service business," Kelleher explains, "the importance of people and their attitudes."

#### Sidebar

Don't leave home without HR, too.

Jill has just been suspended. She was on the receiving end of her fourth customer complaint in just a little over four months. This occurred simultaneously with management announcing exceeding customer expectations is its most important mission.

While following company policy, the manager of one of the company stores has already given Jill a verbal warning, written warning, and placed her on probation. The manager and Jill wrote a very detailed improvement plan with all expectations and consequences laid out. Her behavior changed for a few days each time. But the ending always was the same.

When another customer complained, the manager suspended Jill and recommended termination. The next chapter in Jill's case is unfortunately all too familiar. The Human Resources (HR) manager feels the employee needs one more chance. Why? Because the employee denies being rude. "She was a bitch," as Jill defended her response. "She deserved it. No one could have pleased that woman." Okie-dokie, give the employee an award for valor but bring her back for more?

The employee was given one more chance. What kind of message that does that send? Management promotes customer excellence every chance it gets but tolerates rude employees and abusive managers. Customer service isn't just for new employees, but everyone on the payroll – from maintenance to the CEO.

When executing a customer service excellence strategy, the drivers of this bus will be human resources. From recruiting the right people to terminating the wrong ones, HR practices and policies need to be consistent with the business strategy. Yes, I'll agree terminating a long-term employee is always difficult but that still doesn't excuse rude, insensitive, or insolent behavior. Competing for customers and market share in the customer service excellence game permits only the smallest margin of error. Businesses that win have zero-tolerance for behaviors that don't ensure every customer -internal and external - is very satisfied and expectations have been met or exceeded.

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