EA Insights

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Invisible Customers?

If you've been a long-time *EA Insights* reader, you are well-familiar with stories about my neighborhood grocery store. Having shopped at the same place for more than 20 years, my husband and I have become early Saturday morning staples. We've seen staff come and go but, through it all, there's been a core team that we've come to know and look forward to touching base with during our weekly shopping runs.

In that vein, let me share a recent experience. A new manager was named about two years ago and usually is onsite, out and about, when we shop. During this particular trip, the manager passed us no fewer than five times and was engaged in rather open personal conversations with the team members she encountered during her morning tidying-up duties, but never once acknowledged us...her customers. I'd take it personally, but she didn't smile, nod, wave, or speak to anyone else who was patronizing her store that morning either. Staffers did...their manager...well, we were all invisible to her. Hmmm...

It's that visit that has prompted this edition of *EA Insights*. Let's take a few minutes to think about every leader's role in connection with customer service.

See *us* or not, your customers are watching how YOU lead in service.

June

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Great Customer Service Starts at the Top

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Say the term "customer service", and what comes to mind for many is a group of people staffing a call center or the designated desk for returns, special orders, or exchanges at a brick-and-mortar store. But, such thinking misses so much.

On the contrary, *customer service* is far more. It is the manner in which every person in your organization plans for and engages with the people who may, or who actually do, purchase your goods and/or services. And, because, without customers, you have NO business (*you might want to read that again!*), it is essential that you invest some time into thinking about how to serve your customers well.

The goal for every business should be the provision of excellent service at each touchpoint a person has with your entity. While some staff definitely will have more direct customer contact than others, it is important for every part of the business to be infused with a customer-oriented mindset. However, for that customer-focus to become a part of organizational culture, it must start at the top. So, let's take a look at four essentials for every leader if great customer service is to become synonymous with your company.

Leaders must create the desired customer-service philosophy.
Businesses that deliver exceptional customer service don't do so in a hodge-podge, haphazard way. They coalesce their product/service development and delivery thinking, as well as all related activity, around an intentional customer-focused philosophy.

"Customer first"
"The customer is always right."
"People are our #1 priority."

Examples, like these and the many others that exist, cannot be instituted from the line up; they have to be adopted by leadership and then disseminated throughout the organization. Why? There has to be a single philosophy that trickles through every part of the business so that the mindset in the executive suite is the same as it is in Research and Development, which is consistent with that in Marketing and Sales and all other business units. It also must start at the top because the requisite resources have to be allocated in order to realize the desired approach to customers. So, leaders shape the philosophy around the worth of an entity's customers.

Leaders must set customer-service standards.
Theory is nice, but it means little without specifics. For instance, if a business' philosophy is that the customer is first, what does *that* look like in daily work? Team members need to know how to translate principle into practice and, again, this is where the leader comes in.

Here, senior leadership can be instrumental in setting overarching standards or a customer-related framework for the company as a whole. It then becomes the responsibility of mid-level and/or unit leaders to engage with their teams to tailor that corporate start to the particular work their groups perform. Just as the various instruments in an orchestra are all playing the same song, but each has a unique part in making the music, so it is as an entity drills down and helps its units understand how the central customer-service mindset and practices are to be carried out daily.

Leaders must model what they want to see in others.
You've probably heard it said that "more is caught than is taught". No truer words have ever been said.

Leaders can set philosophies and standards until they are blue in the face. However, if they fail to practice what they preach, success is unlikely. Despite the effectiveness of training and other materials for supplemental learning, the best customer-service example invariably will be the one that staff members see lived out daily in those who lead them. Accordingly, to cultivate an organization that demonstrates customer service excellence, leaders must be selected in light of, and then must model, the company's framework and the type of service they expect others to offer customers.

Leaders must hold everyone accountable for following through.
As I work with organizations, a primary observation is that they often have developed wonderful approaches to customer-service and other critical success areas but fail when it comes to implementation. Having principles on the books is an important first step. Those principles only come to life, though, when hires are made, resources are allocated, and expectations are set and monitored for how "customer focus" is being executed.

So, in the case of customer service, incorporating the appropriate measures into staff members' performance plans and evaluations is critical. As a manager of people, observing, timely praising and/or coaching, and reminding or resetting expectations becomes essential. Also, monitoring individual and team customer-service metrics and customer feedback can identify, on an ongoing basis, the areas to be cheered for strong performance and those in which additional attention is to be given. Without intentional follow through, the notion of customer-service excellence easily can become simply a throw-away or a wish rather than a cornerstone of your organization and a part of its brand.

There is no business without customers. So, doesn't it make sense to examine how your company relates to those you want to do business with you? If exceptional customer service is what you're after, reach out to us at *Executive Advantage*. We are ready to help you to set a philosophy, create standards, weave them throughout your organization, model well, and gauge results on an ongoing basis. Contact us today.

"Branding is not merely about differentiating products; it is about striking emotional chords with consumers. It is about cultivating identity, attachment, and trust to inspire customer loyalty."
~Nirmalya Kumar

"Companies are starting to measure how effective their customer service is and trying to understand what they can do to improve the customer service process."
~Sanjay Kumar

"[They are] successful because the company understands it's a customer service company. It also happens to be an airline."
~Harvey Mackay

"Great customer service does not come by chance. It is the result of training and ensuring there are enough assistants to serve the customers."
~Theo Paphitis

"Your customers are the lifeblood of your business. Their needs and wants impact every aspect of your business, from product development to content marketing to sales to customer service."
~John Rampton

"Whether you have incredible products...or a great service business, it all comes down to fundamental trust and relationship-building with your customers."
~Brandon Webb

About Executive Advantage

At *Executive Advantage*, we are committed to providing results-based business and management consulting, leadership development, and coaching support. We partner with business leaders to build healthy, well-functioning organizations, where goals are met and people thrive. We also partner with individuals to create professional (and personal) lives with clearer direction, improved results, and greater balance.

To learn more about *Executive Advantage*, contact us **online** or at **(301) 280-5950**.

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