EA Insights

EXECUTIVE ADVANTAGE LLC

What Are You Doing to My Store?

If you've been an *EA Insights* reader for a while, you know that I have a favorite grocery store. For more than 20 years now, this is where my family has shopped. We're such regulars that, not only do we look forward to catching up with the service team that's on duty when we go in, we also watch out for other stalwarts whom we meet each week. You might say that we've had the supermarket equivalent of "Cheers" -- that place where you go and people know your name and are glad you came.

That is, until recently. Enter a new store manager. (*Cue the diabolical organ music.*)

Seriously, before you accuse me of just being change averse, which I'll admit I border on sometimes, I was willing to give the new guy a break. After all, change doesn't necessarily mean "bad"; it simply means "different". However, this go-round has been unlike those of the past. The old-timers are still great and a joy to see each week, but the new leadership has ushered in a number of measures, as well as a much more aloof atmosphere, that has affected the customer experience…and not necessarily for the better.

So, where do organizations tend to focus attention when customer dissatisfaction becomes known? Most look to train or retrain the front-line team. But, join me for this month's edition of *EA Insights*, as I share why I think staff training -- though a vital component -- is not the most appropriate *first* step if the goal is to build and maintain meaningful connections with customers.

And, in case you're wondering, I'm still loyal to *my store*…for now…and will be in, like clockwork, for next week's shopping trip.

All the best,

June

June Melvin Mickens
Executive Advantage, LLC

Quotes

"Quality of construction and the design excellence are the key ingredients that set the homes that bear our name apart. With our high level of customer service, we take a personal interest in every home we build."
~Fred Abbo

"Any given week or day doesn't have to be devoted to improving a particular aspect of guest service. An effective customer service approach can come from a mixture of ideas."
~Martin Baird

"A brand for a company is like a reputation for a person. You earn reputation by trying to do hard things well."
~Jeff Bezos

"Customer service is just a day-in, day-out, ongoing, never-ending, unremitting, persevering, compassionate type of activity."
~Leon Gorman

""I have connected by phone with customers who have left negative reviews and had a chance to get to know them. Not only was I able to solve their problems, a lot of the customers were so happy with the customer service

**Lasting Customer Connections
Start with Execs, Not on the Floor**
June Melvin Mickens
Executive Advantage, LLC

It's not uncommon for us to get a call from an organization to do customer service training.
Complaints are rising.
Revenue is down.
Traffic is slowing.
Whatever the prompt, the caller's reaching out because there's a disconnect with customers, and that's clearly a sign that skill building or reinforcement is in order.

Well, maybe….

Don't get me wrong; I appreciate those calls. Hey, somebody's having a business challenge and called *EA*. *(Who doesn't want that?)* But, I must admit; those calls also make me cringe. You see, the call usually stems from a fallacy that the basis for current customer woes rests on the floor -- with the folks on the front lines. And, while a training engagement, at the right time, certainly will be necessary in order to advance the awareness and skills of that group, the direct-service team usually is not the point from which *real* and *lasting* improvement will come. Though hard to believe, it's often true.

For a minute, liken that challenged organization to an iceberg. The people on the phones or on the floor -- the direct-service folks -- are akin to the iceberg's tip. Because this is the part in plain sight, it's easy to assume that that's all there is; dealing with *it* will solve the problem. Unseen in such an approach is the huge, unmoving mass beneath the iceberg's surface. Unless you reckon with it, you get nowhere. That subsurface piece is what usually gets missed in a "customer-service-training-only" quick fix, though. Yes, training does attack the visible obstacles that certainly contribute to customer relations troubles but, because more often than not the training-only approach leaves a whole segment of the issue unaddressed, post-training improvements tend to be short-term at best.

What comprises the rest of the berg? Lurking beneath the surface are beliefs, held by owners and/or executives, that have begun to crystalize and take form -- intentionally or unintentionally -- and that now are directly and/or indirectly affecting customer interactions and buying patterns. Let me share with you four such corporate- or ownership-level beliefs that have a frequent and significant impact on the customer experience.

What We Believe about Our Customers
The business' philosophy about its customers starts at the top. Those in leadership shape how an organization views its patrons -- with angst or with regard, as people to be tolerated or to be valued, as a captured and guaranteed market or relationships to be nurtured, as a means to an end or as *the* end. In subtle, and sometimes not-so-subtle, ways messages about the clientele come from above and permeate customer interactions throughout the entity.

What We Believe about Our Product or Service
We founded *Executive Advantage* to be in the consulting and coaching business. So, what did I do? I engaged coaching and consulting support myself. After all, how can you truly promote something in which you find no value yourself?

But, isn't that what happens in far too many businesses? We're selling something we don't believe in. Would you, or do you, purchase what you make, sell, or deliver? Would you let your mother use it? If the answer is "no", it's time to regroup, redefine, rework…or just retire. Pause and note where the authority lies to overcome core product or service issues – the kind of matters that can bolster or diminish confidence. You won't find it with those on the floor; that level of authority is solely an executive function. However, the lack of brand or product commitment, seen in unresolved service or product issues, often is felt organization-wide and ripples out to the customer.

What We Believe about Our Operation
I met with a client earlier this week who wanted my thoughts on some possible cost-cutting measures. The goal was valid -- to get mean and lean in order to improve profit margin. At the end of the overview,

my first question was a simple one: "This increases your margin, but how will the reductions affect the staff's ability to provide service?" Cricket…cricket.

The connection between operations and end-user experience has to be factored in continuously. Far too often, though, operations are relegated to one sphere, customer connections to another, and never the twain shall meet. Yet, the failure to give meaningful consideration to the impact of operations on customers is similar to dropping staff members into a boxing ring with one hand (or maybe even both) tied behind their backs. When changes are made to resources, processes, or the nature of the operation otherwise, it's not unreasonable to assume that there will be a corresponding impact of some sort on product or service quality as well as on the customer experience. And, those changes -- for better or for worse -- should be addressed in an intentional manner.

What We Believe about Our People
Perhaps the most significant belief impacting the customer experience relates to the people within the organization. The level of value, respect, and care an owner or leader holds for the team speaks volumes. It is felt first by the team itself and serves either to encourage or stifle that team's performance. And, the effects of the leader's belief in the team trickles down to the customer -- to the way products are produced and to the way service is delivered. In other words, what people feel about the way the company treats them, if their work is seen as worthwhile, and whether they are viewed as valuable contributors or expendable pawns shows very clearly in the work they do and in how they engage with customers.

So, in case you were wondering, what do we do when that call comes in for customer-service training? We gladly answer it and prepare diligently with our contact to come in and work with the designated staff group. But, we *also* recommend tackling the whole iceberg, and not simply what's readily apparent at first glance. You see, we, like the caller, want to accomplish results that produce meaningful customer connections. And, that begins with the execs…and then extends to the floor.

If your organization is experiencing customer challenges, it's time to make your call to *Executive Advantage*. We're here to help you define your iceberg and devise a targeted strategy for chipping away at it -- above *and* below the surface -- so that you, your team, and your customers can benefit from the improvements. **Contact us today**.

> *"This … demonstrates what we believe to be true about our customer service. [We are] all about excellence in our relationships and service. The survey results give us a good benchmark, and that helps create new opportunities for us to enhance our customer service and become even better."*
> **~Steve Miller**

> *"Internally, we have got a strategy for all of our products of how we deliver value to customers…. Stage two is how we monetize that value. If we are number one on delivering that value and delivering customer satisfaction, that is a good definition of winning."*
> **~Martin Taylor**

> *"You can't tie employees' hands with cumbersome policies and procedures and expect them to provide exceptional service. It's also important to let employees know that it is OK to make a mistake in the process of working to win customer satisfaction."*
> **~John Tschohl**

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.

View our profile on **Linked**in

Join Our
Mailing List