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Warning: Skunks Ahead



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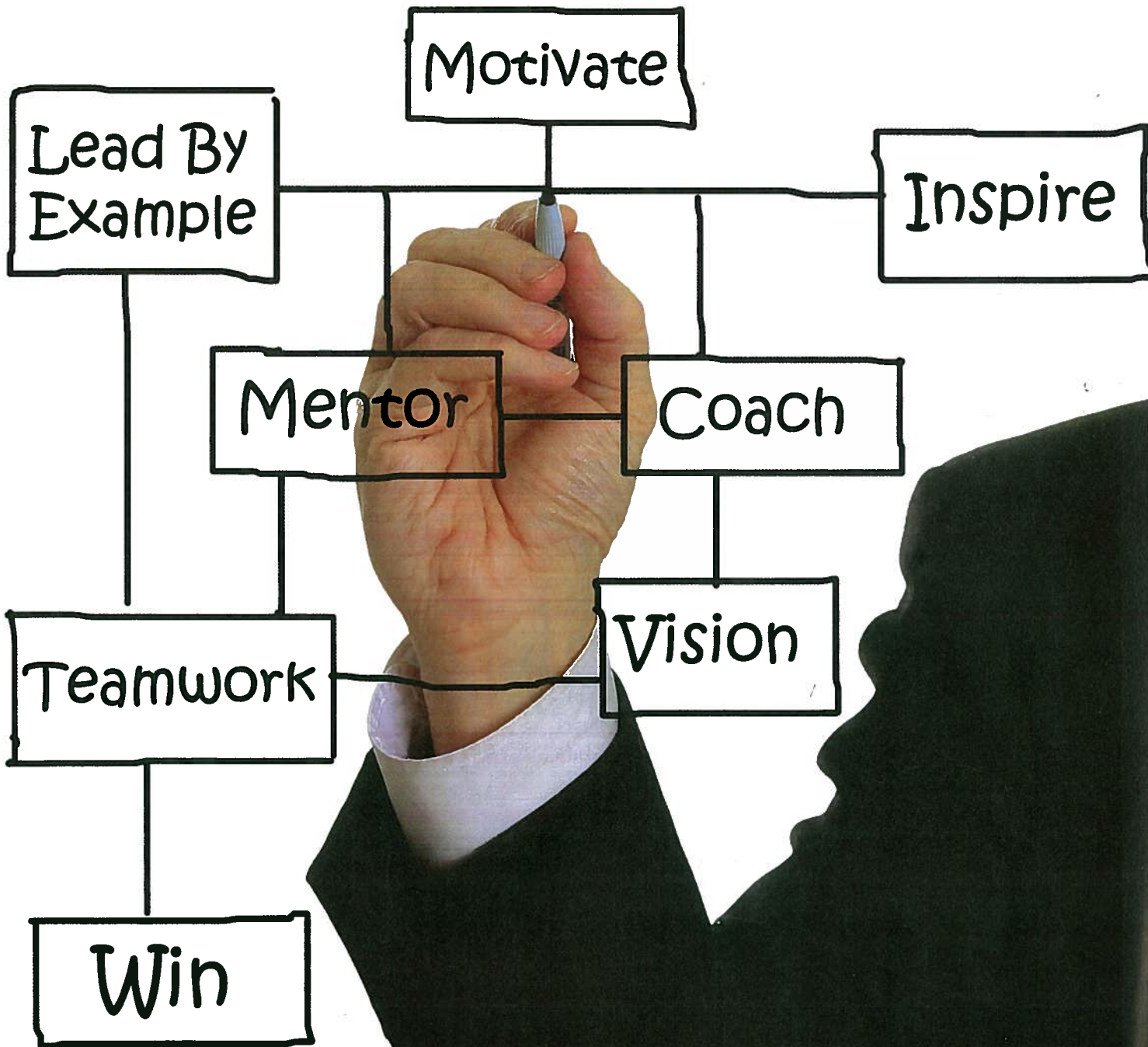
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Why is CUSTOMER SERVICE Actually a PERSONNEL Issue in Today's Business Model?

By Allan Burt



Effective business leadership is easy to talk about but hard to do even in a robust economy. Today, there are new challenges. Does one lead by example or is an individual's leadership ability tied solely to the fact that his signature happens to appear on the weekly paycheck? The possession of leadership skills and knowing where to go are two completely different skill sets. As leaders in today's challenging business climate it's important to target customers and with the right approach.

Customer Service

Customer service starts with a commitment to the creation and maintenance of a company culture or personality that encourages, defines, teaches, supports and rewards behavior that will make raving fans out of customers.¹ If a company fails to provide better customer service than was anticipated, it will be replaced. Today's challenge, more than ever, is to increase the value proposition to the customer without escalating the price or eroding the bottom line. The best leaders think about this, develop a strategy and lead by example. A new customer service strategy starting now has to willingly embrace tactics that address today's constantly changing and more demanding business environment. The foundation of a new strategy begins with understanding: (a) what service a business provides; (b) what customers actually need; (c) what services customers perceive the company to provide and, ultimately; (d) the company's value proposition. Rarely is a company's preconceived understanding of these answers consistent with its customers'.

What Service Your Business Provides

RIA members are committed to implementing the best practices in cleaning and restoration to position their businesses as premier service providers. The investment in training employees and their achieved recognition with association certifications such as the Water Loss SpecialistSM or Certified RestorerSM promote pride and competence. These training investments add confidence in employees' skill sets in their specific roles when a company goes out into the marketplace. These employees become a significant business asset and resource, building confidence in the ability of the company to deliver the customers' desired services as part of its unique selling proposition, and a key differentiator in the marketplace between a company its competitors.

What Customers Really Need

Critical to customer service is understanding that customers may not be aware of the services required to satisfy their wants and needs. Frequently, this is due to their limited understanding of the technical aspects of the situation and requisite solution. It requires a "sixth-sense" and the complete focus of a professional's expertise. An understanding of the dynamics of customer interaction is also critical to successfully and intuitively anticipating

customers' needs. Their confidence can be gained early in the relationship with an understanding of the spectrum of their issues and a company that is poised to respond accordingly.

What Customers Perceive is Being Provided

While a company may believe that its services are fire or carpet restoration, the customer's perception can vary. For a homeowner, it could be the elimination of emotional distress associated with a damaged, treasured heirloom or restoration of their water-soaked residence. In these scenarios, restoration services are assumed to be competent and qualifications are a given. However, it is actually the result-centric customer's subjective perception of the company's final service deliverable that matters. It is not necessarily the adequacy of the performance of the services themselves. When engaged by a customer to perform services, her assumption is that a company will accomplish the task at hand. At this crossroad in value transfer, the value proposition becomes or is gauged by customer satisfaction in terms of the perception of the result. This is one of two customer perceptions.

The questions of how well the services are performed, the quality of the work and employee performance all become internal quality control issues required to guarantee customer satisfaction, which is measured solely in the eyes of the customer. The adequacy of services performed is merely the second perception.

These are two different customer perspectives, each measured solely by the customer, and both of which a business owner must embrace in order to elevate customer service. Not only must the team perform according to best practices, but they must meet the other, much less clearly defined, customer satisfaction/expectation criteria. These are critical elements in the establishment of a successful word-of-mouth marketing campaign. Each satisfied customer is converted into a raving fan for a company and its performance, and they will express this opinion to other potential customers.

How many customers are there on one engagement? If the insurance company engages a company to perform a service for one of its insureds, there are two customers with distinct, and potentially opposite, satisfaction perspectives. Again, as with the insured's perception previously described, there is an understood requirement to perform the work satisfactorily. But what else? The insurance carrier's representative, another key customer, may

subjectively define his satisfaction index by the transparency of the efforts, estimated cost overruns, complaints or timely completion. He may never have communicated any of this to the contractor, and his personal comfort level may be the most important index.

What is the Value Proposition?

A customer may not know what is needed and the estimator or project manager must fulfill the role of trusted intermediary as part of the company's value adds to the fundamental, core competencies. Customer service can become a cost-effective and significant differentiator.

There may actually be more than one customer on a specific job — insurance company representative, independent adjusters or multiple homeowners. Different levels of focus based at the point of interface with each particular customer may be required. Multiple "customers" means that there are multiple roles which govern different objectives and behavior. There is the interaction between companies, which is critical for a continued stream of new opportunities, and compliance with administrative procedures to ensure prompt payment. Also, there is daily contact on the job with different participants. Each has the potential to materially impact the overall relationship value and future opportunities.

Company Culture — The Right Approach

If the company is not already a proponent of enhanced customer service, the owner should survey the organizational behavior. The personality of any company radiates from the top down. If the owner and employees are already committed, reassessment can improve its effectiveness through a determination of whether process improvement is required. To create or enhance the corporate culture or business personality requires training to initiate the behavior modification process. It starts with awareness throughout the company that every customer touch creates an opportunity to establish preeminence in customer service.

Education and training, beyond the trade skills, requires preparing employees through coaching and behavioral reinforcement by leadership to become customer savvy. It is the ultimate in empowerment because both their work and demeanor can impact the outcome of an event. And owners have to be willing to release total control of customer satisfaction to their employees. Depending on a company's size, this transformation may be

formal or informal, but it must be continuous and it must infect everyone. It changes the business internally and externally.

Elevate the Standard

Do employees understand what their customer service role is in a community driven marketing (CDM) environment where word of mouth is the key to creating new business through the development of raving fans? Jeremy Epstein, a social networking expert, (www.neverstopmarketing.com), defines CDM as "the most cost-effective way to find, retain, and grow clients and customers."

Where does it start? With a conscious effort to modify organizational behavior, or simply said — company personality. Who sets this personality for a company and how is it portrayed to the customer in a world of transparency? A new dynamic today is the Internet with websites, blogging and tweets. The website can become a great portal for the measurement of customer satisfaction and feedback which are critical to success.²

Owners and leaders create a business standard for service. Through behavior modification as a company, the value proposition to customers can be enhanced by providing preeminent services beyond core competencies. Then, word of mouth marketing becomes a tactic to help expand a sales force through customers at no cost. Be remarkable. Enhanced customer service can become the high quality differentiator to make a firm remarkable,

indispensable and unique in service delivery.² ■

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References

- ¹ *Raving Fans: A Revolutionary Approach to Customer Service* by Ken Blanchard.
- ² Seth Godin's new book, *Purple Cow* is about transforming your business by being remarkable.

