

Think before you help

Stronger relationships are often the pathway to better customer service

INTERVIEWED BY MARK SCOTT

Employees who approach their work with confidence are more likely to bring the same positive energy to their interactions with customers, says Aaron Barnhart, Senior Vice President and Retail Sales Leader at Westfield Bank. Thus, one of the best ways to strengthen customer service in a company is to place employees in roles that fit with what they do best.

“The ability to relate to customers with confidence and compassion can make a world of difference,” Barnhart says. “When customers see that you employ individuals who are invested in their needs and are eager to provide a high level of service, it reflects well on the employee and your company as a whole. Customer service becomes less about being a job and more about helping people.”

The key to making this work is creating an environment where supporting customers and relationship building are held to the same high standards as being knowledgeable about the business.

Smart Business spoke with Barnhart about how to put your employees in position to provide great customer service.

What is a common mistake that companies make in trying to provide great customer service?

Companies often fall into the trap of talking about how good they are at providing customer service without clearly defining how they deliver on that promise. What is at the core of their exemplary service? You want employees who enjoy their work and understand your business. But they also need to be familiar with your company's approach to customer service so they can respond in the moment. If this knowledge hasn't been conveyed, or the

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company itself doesn't fully understand the pillars on which its customer service platform was created, that's a problem.

A customer service plan could center on building strong relationships, delivering quick response times, providing multiple contact points, flexibility or any number of other points. It could be a mix of all these characteristics. The critical piece is that the components of the plan need to be clearly defined. Once the framework of a plan has been conceived, it's important that everyone understands the thought process behind it and can visualize how it should be carried out.

What's the key to empowering employees?

Obviously, there is a hierarchy in any organization in terms of the authority to act and make decisions. However, it's important that customers not feel as if they are being passed from one person to the next in their attempt to get a problem resolved. Successful organizations empower their business unit managers with standards. They are then passed down to department leaders, who are empowered with the authority to work within those standards to provide a positive customer experience.

Take steps to ensure that employees who do not have as much authority have easy access to someone who does to facilitate

a faster response when a problem comes up. In some cases, it could be a very simple matter that a front-line employee can respond to without managerial support. Schedule regular training sessions to talk about various scenarios that might occur during the workday to ensure that employees are as prepared as possible to assist customers.

How has technology affected customer service?

Technology makes it easier for customers to do business without the need to interact with someone in person or on the phone. From a profitability and efficiency standpoint, this can free up personnel to focus on other important tasks. But that productivity comes with a cost if companies fail to maintain open communication channels for customers to ask questions, provide feedback and share their thoughts on your business. This is where relationship building becomes key. Companies in today's world must make the most out of every face-to-face interaction because there are now fewer of them. When those opportunities arise, talk about the new tools that are available and learn how customers feel about them. Make the extra effort to help customers have a better experience with your business. ●