

## **Aim To Delight**

Certainly, there isn't one person in our industry who doesn't acknowledge the importance of good customer service in building and sustaining a successful and profitable business. We all know that loyal customers are more valuable. And, in the promotional products industry, because of the high level of competition, the concepts of customer service and partnering with your clients are ones that you as small business owners are constantly being challenged to improve upon.

Studies have proven that loyal customers are more valuable in that they produce higher revenues, cost less to maintain, will often refer more business to you, and the more loyal your clients are, the less likely price is to be a major factor in their decision-making process. Consequently, it is in your best interest to determine how you can both develop and maintain a loyal client base. The obvious way to do this is to create an organization that is not only customer-focused, but customer-driven. For some of you, this may simply require some simple policy changes, additional training or new personnel. However, if you truly want to become a customer-focused business, there is a major transition that needs to take place.

Being customer-focused implies the ability to develop, manage and execute every aspect of your business in a manner that consistently enables you to exceed your client's expectations. In this type of environment, customer service becomes the foundation of everything you do and the perspective from which you evaluate all of your plans, actions and decisions. Everything from the marketing and sales planning, recruiting talent to designing internal policies must be done with an eye for customer service.

### **Challenges**

Becoming customer-focused involves every person, process and decision in your organization and therefore, requires a major commitment from you to instill the values

and the programs that support this philosophy. This transition can create some significant challenges for the small-business owner. First, as the leader of your business, you are the one who must initiate and drive this transition if it is to be successful. If you don't believe in it passionately, none of your employees will. Second, it is important that you do not underestimate the challenge ahead of you. Whether you have two employees or 20, people are often resistant to change.

In a small company, it is critical that you are personally committed to becoming more customer-focused and that you are willing to devote time and resources to the process. Though the commitment of the senior executive is essential to the success of any major change initiative, it is especially true in small organizations where the owners set the tone and culture for employees or where they themselves are the primary/sole contact with the clients.

Therefore, it is essential that before you embark on this type of transition you truly believe that becoming more customer-focused is important to the current and future success of your business. If you aren't sure, you need to take some time to evaluate the following:

- What are your honest beliefs about the importance of customer service to the success of your business?
- How much are you willing to invest over the next year, three years or five years to become a more customer-focused company?
- Are you willing and able to accept a short-term reduction in profits to gain long-term improvements in service and quality?
- Are you willing to sufficiently empower your employees to make decisions in the best interest of the customer?
- Are you willing to accept the sacrifices and consequences that are an inevitable part of this transition?

These are difficult questions because they force you to look long and hard at the resources you have available to devote to this type of transition. Remember, becoming customer-focused isn't just about bringing on a new customer service representative or upgrading your computer system, it may involve a change in your overall philosophy about how you do business and will likely have a short-term negative effect on your financials. Further, because this type of transition involves such wide-reaching change, it's positive results may not be evident for at least one year, and possibly longer.

### **Getting Started**

If your decision is to move forward, your first step must be to assess the quality of your services from the client's perspective. Though it is critical that you understand the strengths and capabilities of your organization and have clear beliefs on what good customer service looks like, it is essential that you take into consideration what your clients believe is important and their assessment of the quality of your service and products. A truly customer-driven enterprise constantly challenges itself to answer the following critical questions.

- What are our client's needs and expectations and which of these needs and expectations matter most to them?
- How well is my company meeting those needs and expectations?
- How well are my competitors meeting them?
- How can I go beyond the minimum that will satisfy my customer to truly delight them?

This concept of exceeding your clients' expectations is critical. Customer-driven companies are not just looking to meet their client's needs and expectations. They want to exceed them and they want to do this better and quicker than their competition.

Clearly there is value in making your organization more customer-focused and it is important to remember that you can improve the quality of your customer service without taking on a large-scale change initiative. However if you do not make the full commitment, your results are likely to have limited effect and the changes will not be truly embraced by your employees. Therefore, you must be realistic in defining your level of commitment and setting expectations, and be willing to fully support whatever level of change for it to be successful.

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