

BY JOHN TSCHOHL



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ompanies that provide a combination of quality products, competitive prices and exceptional customer service enjoy success and survival. But to have that winning combination, they must train and nurture their staff. If you're responsible for staff training, read on for some valuable tips.

We've all dealt with employees who are curt, rude, and downright sullen, and we've wondered what is going on in their lives—and their jobs—that makes them view the world with such negative attitudes. We couldn't get away from those employees fast enough. On the other

## Incorporate these elements into staff development and watch the bottom line reap the results

hand, when we deal with smiling, knowledgeable, upbeat people, we are more inclined to do business with those employees—and those companies—again.

It isn't difficult for employers to educate employees about the company's products and services so that they can help customers make informed choices. It's much more difficult to provide those employees with the people skills that will help them communicate effectively with customers and provide the type of service that will keep customers coming back to you.

### Learn "Service Recovery"

Self-imposed limitations are a major stumbling block for many employees. If you're responsible for training other staff, it's your job to help them see themselves as they can be, not as they are. You must give them the skills and the confidence to handle any situation that arises and to do so in a way that satisfies the customer. How? Train them well and reward them often.

A key element of every training program should focus on teaching employees how to handle difficult situations and irate customers. Nothing is more frustrating for employees than not having the tools they need to do their jobs—and knowledge is a powerful tool. When faced with an irate customer, most employees don't know how to handle the situation, so they either blame the problem on someone else or become defensive, which only escalates the situation.

Teach employees how to handle those customers and view problems as opportunities to win customer loyalty by solving problems quickly and effectively. This is called service recovery. How companies and their employees respond to mistakes is what separates successful, customer-

service driven organizations from the rest of the pack.

And it takes just three simple steps: apologize, take responsibility for the problem, and give the customer something of value as a way to get her to return to you. That "something" might be a free dessert from a restaurant, a free oil change from a service station, or a free first-class upgrade from an airline. It doesn't have to cost the company a lot of money, but it does have to have value in the eyes of the customer.

The purpose of service recovery is to prevent customer defections. If you solve your customers' problems and resolve their complaints, they will stay with you.

### Reinforce with Praise

Once you've trained the employees, you must reinforce that training with positive reinforcement and public praise. Too often, the only time employees get any attention is when they make mistakes. They need to know that their contributions are noticed and appreciated. How all employees feel about themselves and their jobs is reflected in how they treat customers.

Even small successes should be celebrated. Deliver "thank you's" in person as often as possible. A well-deserved word of praise can do much to set the standard for quality service in your organization. Recognition improves self-esteem, which results in increased pride and productivity, and consequently, sales and profits.

It's also important to continue to counsel and coach the people you train. Train

them, then nurture them. Encourage them to set goals and help them accomplish those goals. When you do, you develop a cohesive team that is enthusiastic and productive and that will drive the business. Working together to accomplish a valued objective builds team spirit and a customer-oriented corporate culture. Both are essential elements of a successful company.

Finally, empower the employees you supervise. When you do, they will feel good about themselves and their jobs. Teach them how to handle difficult situations and then give them the authority to handle customer complaints and concerns on the spot. Let them know they can occasionally bend the rules in order to serve your customers. Empowerment is a powerful motivational tool. When you empower your employees, you show them that you trust their judgment and are confident in their ability to handle difficult situations that will result in satisfied and loyal customers.

Unleash your employees' talents and make them feel they are valued members of the team. Train them, empower them, and reward them. Employees who are customer-driven will love their jobs and will drive the success of your company.

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