

## **The Power of Positive Contact**

Imagine walking into a business and upon asking the employee working behind the counter how his day has been, you hear, “Do you really want to know?” delivered in a sarcastic manner. Now picture this same person complaining about the amount of paperwork he has to complete.

Would you be inclined to do business with this company? Highly unlikely.

As a business owner or manager, you are probably shaking your head and thinking this could never happen in your company. Think again! I experienced this situation a few months ago when I was looking for a replacement battery for my cordless telephone.

These types of situations happen in an instant. And in those few moments of time a customer is potentially lost. Every moment of contact you and your team have with your customers either reinforces their loyalty and confirms their decision to do business with you or causes them to consider taking their business to one of your competitors.

Obviously, you cannot monitor every comment made by your employees every moment of every business day. However, you can reduce the possibility of this happening by following a few strategies.

First, you must lead by example. Your employees pay careful attention to how you treat customers, suppliers, and their coworkers. Actions always speak louder than words. You can tell your team to treat customers with respect and dignity but if you occasionally snap at a customer or show your frustration on a regular basis, your behaviour will ultimately influence the way your employees interact with your customers. This is particularly challenging because owners and managers must wear so many hats and deal with a variety of situations at any given time.

The second strategy is to hire the right people. We tend to hire people based on technical ability, yet we frequently let them go because of their inability to interact well with our customers or other employees. You can teach almost anyone “how” to do something providing they possess the desire to learn. However, it is extremely difficult to teach customer service skills to individuals who do not possess interpersonal skills.

Rather than focus on their job experience during an interview, direct your attention to how they have handled specific situations in the past. Ask behavioural style questions to determine their ability to manage challenging customers or deal with stressful situations. Here are a few examples;

“Describe a situation when you had to deal with a challenging customer.”

“Tell me how you manage several tasks at a time.”

“Explain what customer service means to you? How do you ensure that you deliver good service?”

Questions such as these will help you determine if the individual you are considering for the position possesses the necessary skills to represent your business in a positive manner.

The third strategy is to create a positive work environment. My wife and I generally buy our groceries at two or three different stores. At one store, a manager or supervisor is constantly “prowls” in front of the cash terminals taking notes on a clipboard. They seldom smile or talk to the cashiers unless they are giving instructions. In fact, based on their facial expressions, it appears that the managers always seem to be dealing with some crisis or problem. The employees in the store rarely speak to their customers and most give the appearance that they would rather be someplace else.

Compare that environment to the other two stores where all the employees smile and talk to the customers. Cashiers willingly help each other when they are not busy or do not have customers in line. Other employees in the store make eye contact and smile as well. There is a good feeling in the store and the shopping experience is enjoyable. The impact of the management team’s approach is visible - the first store is constantly advertising for staff while the other two stores have very little turnover.

The final strategy is to help your team understand the impact their actions have on the well-being of the business. It is not uncommon for employees to discuss their personal problems with each other at work. However, more often than not, this is done within earshot of customers. Customers have enough problems of their own – they don’t want to hear employees griping about their concerns.

The most effective way to get this point across is to ask your team members when they have experienced negative behaviour by an employee of a business. There is a strong chance that everyone will be able to recall a situation. Ask them to share how this experience influenced their decision to do business with that particular company. Then ask them to think of a time when a similar situation may have occurred in your business. Finally, ask them to brainstorm ideas how they can prevent these situations from arising again. This will help them fully understand the impact of their actions.

Every contact with a customer affects your business. Help your team learn the impact of positive contact.

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