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## Creating a service-oriented company takes commitment

Review the current thinking on customer service, and you will find that having customers who are merely satisfied isn't enough anymore.

Today's experts suggest that, ideally, your customers would feel a "til-death-do-us-part" sense of loyalty to your company and its products. Of course, building that kind of life-long devotion takes time, commitment and hard work. It also requires a service-oriented company culture and employees who are committed to delivering exceptional care.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I should admit that I am not an expert on the subject of customer service but don't be too quick to tune me out. As co-owner of a company that has spent the last several years overhauling its customer service protocol, I have learned some invaluable lessons about what it takes to transition from a company that cares about its clients to one that demonstrates genuine care during every client interaction.

**• Top-down culture and commitment:** Leaders may not always recognize the significant role they play within their organizations, but they are responsible for setting the tone for their companies. The importance of a leader's commitment to fostering a caring culture that embraces service as a platform cannot be overstated. Employees will rally behind initiatives that owners or top executives endorse, because those will be perceived to be the most strategic, and perhaps even career-building, endeavors. When a project is not outwardly supported by top leaders, it is perceived, rightly or wrongly, as superficial and less important.



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**• Identify internal champions:** Successfully bringing about cultural change requires top-level commitment, but implementing related process and procedural changes takes something more. Reinventing a company's customer service model requires continuous planning and constant attention. In the case of our company, we entirely revamped how we addressed client calls and responded to inquiries and needs. As a result we had to research, install and test a new customer service system, establish and implement new protocols and of course, train qualified people that were not only knowledgeable about our business, but excited about the role they would serve for clients and our company. To oversee a project of that magnitude, it was critical to identify an internal champion who was not only personally committed to customer service but who also had the passion and conviction to motivate others.

**• Commit resources:** Delivering exceptional service requires teams of talented people who are equipped with progressive technology and top-notch tools, so be prepared to commit dollars and resources to the initiative.

**• Hire the right people:** Because one person can make or break a customer encounter, it's critical that the right people are working for your company. The most effective way to do that is by identifying service-oriented people during the hiring process. Ask interview questions that measure an applicant's level of customer care and their experience in dealing with difficult clients.

**• Empower employees:** Not long after our company launched its customer service initiative, I had an employee contact me about whether it would be all right for the company to send flowers to a client whose mother had passed away. While I was pleased to be made

aware of the situation, I was frustrated that the employee felt it necessary to ask my permission to do something so right. I realized I had failed to properly empower my employees. Because it is employees who ultimately deliver customer service, they have to feel empowered to do what they believe is right in a given situation. Of course, guidelines are useful and monetary limits may be warranted, but a waiter should feel free to comp a dessert and a travel agent should be able to provide a free day's car rental if by doing so a customer walks away feeling better about the company.

**• Make training a priority:** Front-line customer service representatives need to understand the business and be well-versed in all aspects of their company's offerings so they can address client concerns that may be complex or technical in nature. However, it is just as important to also train front line representatives to effectively deal with people under the most difficult or delicate of circumstances.

Customer service isn't a box that can ever realistically be checked off a "to do" list. Delivering remarkable service requires ongoing, companywide commitment and continuous attention.

Experts have written volumes about exceptional customer service and why customers' experiences, and in turn their perceptions, are so important to your company's success. More than likely though, you don't need an expert to convince you that in this difficult economic environment keeping loyal customers by delivering exceptional service is smart business.

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