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How Others Serve Internally

By Bob Livingston



Great service companies share common beliefs about the importance of culture, behaviors, people, and relationships. These beliefs manifest themselves in different ways, but they form the core of each company's operating principles. There is great value in understanding and exploring how all of these benchmark companies do what they do. Looking for points of commonality that define their approach to Service Excellence is important to understand. Here are some of those points:

- They treat everyone as equals in matters of service
- They tend to put associates first, customers second or at least on equal footing
- They all seem to hire for attitude and then train for specific skills
- Everyone is empowered to interact with clients to solve problems and resolve conflict
- There are no "superstars" ; the focus is on teamwork
- Rewards and recognition are a visible support of their service strategy

All benchmark companies may not embrace all of the above, but they all embrace most of them.

They treat everyone as equals in matters of service

Hierarchies are necessary for spelling out what people do. But in the scope of how you do what you do, great service benchmark companies treat everyone as equal. This is not inscribed on a wall plaque; it is evidenced, very simply, by watching how everyone behaves.

They tend to put associates first, customers second or at least on equal footing

Are you willing to put your associates first? Great service companies value a setting where associates feel significant, respected, and well treated. They understand that attitudes and behaviors are contagious and that their treatment of employees will rebound to their clients, who in turn will be made to feel significant, respected, and well treated. Do not mistake this as minimizing clients' significance in any way. Rather, think of it as a team game where the better your teammates, the better you play. Great service companies understand that the more they empower and respect their associates, the happier their clients will be.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate this notion of "Associates First" is to look at a few of Fortune's Best Companies to Work For in 2007 and see how these practices reflect their cultures:

Google (No. 1 ranked) offers free gourmet meals daily; allows you to bring your dog to work; provides car wash, free laundry, barber and massage services; pays you \$5,000 to buy a hybrid car; has no dress code; has a swimming pool, spa, gyms, and game rooms; and offers free on-site medical care. Engineers can also spend 20 percent of their time on independent projects, which led to the development of Gmail. Is it any wonder they're ranked No. 1?

Genentech (No. 2 ranked) is a biotech leader with uncommonly loyal staffers. "Wild horses could not drag me away," says one employee. Last year 537 employees took six-week paid sabbaticals, available to every associate for each six-year term of service.

The Container Store (No. 4 ranked), a storage products retailer, pays sales employees 50 to 100 percent above industry average. Nearly one-tenth of all employees take advantage of the family-friendly shift, from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., allowing for school drop-offs and pickups.

Methodist Hospital System (No. 9 ranked) sent all but the top executives a \$250 Chevron gift card, in the wake of soaring gas prices. This gesture prompted more than 500 staffers to send thank you e-mails to CEO Ron Giroto.

Here is an interesting statistic we uncovered regarding health-care benefits for employees. Of the Top 100 Best Companies to Work For, 40 percent pay 100 percent of the health-care premiums for their employees. Among the Fortune 500 companies, that number is 14 percent. If you have ever wondered about the extent to which insurance premiums impact an employee's perception of their value, this is telling.

This is very uncomplicated really. If you put your associates first, your clients will feel as though they have been put first. That is the subtle translation of how great service companies, who sincerely value their associates, become great partners to their clients.

They all seem to hire for attitude and then train for specific skills

You are vigilant about your culture, doing all of the right things. The last thing you want to do is sabotage your progress by hiring people who do not fit well with your culture. This is not to say there's anything wrong with these potential candidates. It's simply that neither party will be happy, and your culture will suffer should you engage the services of someone who is not suited to live and own the culture. This suggests the need for a defined interviewing protocol.

Everyone is empowered to interact with clients to solve problems and resolve conflict

Within logical parameters, service-centric companies empower their associates to make decisions in order to satisfy the needs of those they serve. Great service companies publicly commend associates who proactively address problems even though they may occasionally fail. Their message is, better to step up and act in the best interests of the client than do nothing. Creativity in problem solving is encouraged, limiting the need to ask for permission within reasonable boundaries.

There are no "superstars"; the focus is on teamwork

Everyone is equal in matters of service, so it follows that all positions are of equal value when it comes to service. Titles then become meaningless and fun. You will laugh at the following list of actual titles we found on various blogs and Web sites. But looking beyond the humor for a moment, you will see how these titles support the principle that attitudes and behaviors (how) define you or your company—not skills (what). Some examples:

Chief Evangelist (aka CEO)

Chief People Person (aka human resources director)

Director of First Impressions (aka receptionist)

Director of Mind and Mood

An environment that doesn't cotton to superstars has the character and integrity to genuinely respect all positions and levels within the organization. These companies value the success of the culture or team over the success of the individual.

Rewards and recognition are a visible support of their service strategy

People are motivated by rewards and recognition. Particularly in a service culture, recognition must be creative and meaningful or the result will be the opposite of the desired effect. In recognizing great service, personal attention resonates most with colleagues. Remember, personal interactions not only define you; they also satisfy the soft needs of those you are recognizing. Consider the possibilities:

- A personal, handwritten note of appreciation is far more meaningful than an e-mail.
- Public recognition through a Service Excellence communiqué works wonders.
- Praise from and among peers provides great inspiration.
- A team meeting is a great forum for acknowledging and celebrating outstanding service actions.
- Widely sharing recognition from external clients is both appreciated and flattering.

Done well, you cannot recognize people enough for their achievements. Be creative, and guard against trite forms of gratitude. Have a filter; don't try to create something where there is nothing. Favoritism has no place in reward and recognition programs. Doing this well requires listening, thinking, creativity, and time, but the upside potential is tremendous.

These are some of the approaches Service Excellence companies take in defining how they do what they do. These are wonderful behaviors to emulate and model yourself after.

About the author:

Bob Livingston formerly head of sales at Unilever's The Lipton Company, is the founder and CEO of REL Communications, a consulting firm that moderates the Client Service Advisory boards. He also leads service-based cultural transformations within the companies with which he consults. His book, *How you do...What you do*, is available from McGraw Hill. [How you do..What you do](#)