

CUSTOMER-FOCUS: An Investment in Your People

By David H. McNair

Foreword by Horst Schulze – President of Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company

I am no stranger to customer service. At The Ritz-Carlton, our hotels are often cited as one of the world's true icons of exceptional customer service. Of this, I am personally very proud. Of our people who serve so willing and tirelessly, I am truly and deeply grateful. And a question that I am asked repeatedly, "how do you instill such a consistently high level of service?" I only wish the answer were so simple. My short answer is our people. Our people truly and genuinely care. We believe in "moving heaven and earth" to make our guests happy, but also realize that two ingredients are necessary for that to occur – culture (philosophy) and a plan. The service culture must start at the top, and through shared vision and values, permeate the entire organization. Exceptional service comes from our people, and your people. At the same time it must be backed by a strong service culture, training, technology and systems that empower us to serve.

How to Give Exceptional Customer Service speaks to front-line associates, managers/leaders, CEO's and owners alike. It's not hype; it's real issues with real solutions. . . not to mention some great humor mixed in. Whether you are tire dealer in South Carolina, a dry cleaner in California, or major manufacturer in the northeast, this book can and will help you. It talks retail. . . it talks professional service firms...it talks business-to-business, and most everything in between. How to Give Exceptional Service has tips, team and individual exercises, humorous cartoons, and most of all, real life anecdotes from the authors to bring home the experiences of poor and exceptional service.

I join these authors in encouraging you to make a difference in how we serve. Begin your journey to Exceptional Service today and set the standards for others to follow. You'll be glad you did!

Training is Sustaining *(excerpt from Chapter Two: Aerobicize Your Program)*

Let's begin by establishing what we mean by training. Training comes in many shapes and sizes. It is informal and formal. It's introductory and refresher. It can be fun and participative. It can be grueling and intense. It is an investment, not a cost. Most importantly, training must be ONGOING!

At *Lands End* catalogue, customer care representatives receive 75 hours of initial training before they are allowed to answer the first call. At Federal Express, new employees receive 5 weeks of training with refresher courses every four months. And at Disney World, no employee is allowed to begin work within the theme park until he or she has completed an introductory 3 weeks of education. As for the folks at Ritz-Carlton, they estimate that an average of \$2700 to \$3500 is spent training each employee. And guess

what – their turnover is 40% below industry standards. Numerous examples can be cited, but just consider this league of companies that invest in training. These companies know that it's the quality of their workforce, and the appreciation of the customer is that sustains their business growth. They know that their training is one of their better investments.

At Target stores, a national discount retailer, employee turnover among hourly associates was a staggering 89% in 1989. They were able to whittle that down in a little more than two years to 59%. They did that by creating Target University. This university truly gives people skills, ways to deal with difficult customers, and ways to deal with some of the stressful situations that they can find themselves in. Basically, they are equipping people emotionally to handle the front line. They are not just teaching them how to run cash registers and stock inventory. And guess what? In addition to decreasing turnover, Target also experienced increased customer satisfaction scores during the same period.

Many large companies have in-house learning centers such as Target University. We like the name *learning center* because it conveys the benefit to the employee, as opposed to training center, which merely describes the function, that is being performed. At many of these organizations, becoming a trainer is quite an accomplishment. Training positions are highly sought, are compensated well, and command the respect of fellow associates and top management.

Learning centers are excellent, but they can have their drawbacks as well. They may tend to centralize and formalize the training function such that information is not as relevant and easy to access as it should be. By their very nature, learning centers also can become stale and canned in their material and presentation. Think about it. Shouldn't learning be integrated into everyday activities as much as possible? This is where employee teams have a distinct advantage. You can take the initiative to include training snippets into each and every team meeting. Plan to set aside 10 minutes of each team meeting to discuss a service-related event or issue. This can be as simple as reviewing a very positive service event and what specifically made the difference to the customer. You could rotate the responsibility with a different person responsible each week for bringing an article of service to the meeting for discussion. Be creative, but be disciplined. Don't let this be the last item that gets squeezed off the meeting agenda. If you do, you will have said a great deal about where you place service training in your priorities. This can be a fun and productive way of involving all team members in honing their customer care skills.