

Using Recognition to Build “Forever” Customers

By Rosalind Jeffries

Does anything turn off a customer more than going into a store where a sullen cashier takes their money, mumbles answers to their questions, and obviously could care less if they shopped there? Would you go back to that store? Not often if you could help it.

Certainly, poor customer service will drive customers away. But in these days of increasing price competition from big chains, even *average* customer service isn't enough to create the “forever” customers who can spell financial success for your business. *Exceptional* customer service will encourage your customers to come back no matter what. And that kind of service takes loyal employees who are motivated to give your business a leading edge over the competition. Employee recognition is the powerful tool that can help you create just that kind of motivation.

So exactly what is—and isn't—recognition? It's more than a paycheck and more than acknowledging that your employees are competent. Recognition is showing your workers that you value their efforts, and congratulating them for a job well done. The secret to successfully recognizing them is to make your effort match their need.

Generally, employees respond to creative types of recognition, and the good news is this: Creativity doesn't have to be expensive. It does have to be tailored to the person. When recognition is personalized, it does more than make employees feel good about themselves and their efforts. It makes them feel good about the company, and that can snowball to better customer service and better business.

In the urban workplace, diversity is a factor in how employees like to be recognized. Learning what is important to an individual, and respecting their personal and professional boundaries can make the difference between recognition success and failure. The quality of relationships, for example, carries great value to African-Americans and Hispanics. So taking the time to greet them by name or individually praise their work may be particularly important. Asian Americans, on the other hand, may be more comfortable with group recognition. Because group identity is paramount in many Asian cultures, recognizing an individual out of the context and comfort of their group could cause them to lose face.

When you understand what is important to individual employees, you can use that as a basis for effectively recognizing their efforts. Showing your employees that you recognize and respect their diversity will also help them work with a diverse customer base.

Below is an easy-to-follow list of do's and don'ts that can help you put recognition to work in your company today:

Motivational Do's:

Simple acknowledgments like these yield big results, especially when you make them habits:

- Say “thank-you” to employees in public, where their peers can hear.
- Take time to listen when employees want to share an idea or voice a concern.
- Give employees the authority to correct customer problems.
- Be specific when acknowledging performance.
- Ask employees for their input when decisions are being made that affect them.
- Create a sense of ownership by encouraging employees to generate ideas for improved services and new products.

Demoralizing Don'ts:

You'll see performance drop and employees leave if you:

- Never stop to ask, “How are you?” or say “thank-you.”
- Decide a paycheck is thanks enough for a job well done.
- Keep employees out of the decision-making process.
- Forget to acknowledge employee strengths.
- Limit employee development.

While practicing recognition doesn't have to cost a lot, not practicing it can cost you plenty. A long-term commitment to recognition in your business can deliver the excellent customer service and satisfaction that come with having loyal, motivated employees. By recognizing your employees and building positive relationships—a core value in all ethnic communities—you'll increase not only your base of “forever” customers but your bottom line as well.

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