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Tips to Help You Build a Customer-Centric Culture

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It's the start of a new year. That means new beginnings, new strategies and a renewed passion to succeed.

This is when you have made your plans to maximize your results. In some cases, you have altered your stocking levels to be more efficient. You have created your budgets and are ready to go get those numbers. And maybe you have even raised your labor rate to help improve your gross profits.

All of these things are absolutely the right things to do. But do not forget that in order to achieve what you want in the new year, you cannot forget what business you are in.

Yes, you sell tires and automotive service, but the main business you are in is the people business.

Let me explain. The consumer has many options as to where to go for their tires and auto service. In fact, within a couple-mile radius of your location, there may be dozens of options. If that is the case, why do they choose you?

The answer is the experience they receive when doing business with you. There is an old saying that people will not remember what you said to them, but they will remember how you made them feel.

In our industry, this is especially true.

Those dealers who focus on an exceptional customer experience find themselves staying busy and collecting what they want for what they do. Those who do not are forced to discount and undercut their own business just to keep going.

This concept is nothing new. To be successful in this industry, you need to have a passion for people. And you need to surround yourself with a staff that shares the same passion. It starts there.

If you truly want your customers to have an exceptional experience doing business with you, every member of your team needs to be just as committed to delivering it.

Watch how your team interacts with your customers. Are they going through the motions or are they truly committed to giving the customer an outstanding experience? You need to watch closely because sometimes it is not easy to tell. However, your customers will definitely know the difference.

Think about it. Have you noticed that a longtime customer is just not coming to you as often - or at all - anymore? Why is this? If you get an opportunity to inquire with that customer, you are going to find out that at some point they encountered someone inside your business who just did not seem to care.

Remember, customers will always remember how you made them feel. That single experience created a negative feeling. Often, you simply do not get another chance to correct it.

Now, let's consider the loyal customers who continue coming to you. This is because each time they have interacted with your business, they received an experience that kept them wanting to come back. Your business has built a level of trust and expectation with those customers that is consistent every time.

Something else you will notice about these customers is that cost no longer matters. If a service that should be performed is brought to their attention, it is usually followed with an "OK -- do it."

It has gotten to that point because you have routinely treated them right. You cannot take advantage of that trust and do something you shouldn't. My point is that you do not need to hard sell and you do not need to discount your service. You have earned the trust and confidence of those customers.

Knowing that you are in the people business, you cannot leave it to chance that everyone within your business will be providing customers with an exceptional experience. You need to plan for how you and your team will do it.

The first thing is to ensure that you have the right people interacting with your customers. As you look to fill roles in your counter staff, focus on bringing in people with customer service at heart.

Too often, we look to hire those with automotive or tire experience. Often, you will find yourself trying to break old habits they had developed at their previous employers, rather than getting them to follow what you need them to do.

I suggest looking for people who enjoy helping others first. You can teach them the rest.

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A very successful multi-unit manager I once knew often said, “We don’t give heart transplants.” In other words, if your employees do not have customer service-oriented hearts, you are wasting your time.

Next is to ensure that your team understands customers’ expectations. Studies have shown that other than visiting the dentist, having their car serviced is something most people dread the most.

With that in mind, you need to create an atmosphere in your store that is welcoming and stress-free. You want customers to feel more at ease. This starts with their first contact with your business, either in person or on the phone. Friendly smiles go a long way! So does active listening with empathy.

As customers explain their issues or wants, make sure they are getting 100% of your attention. If they are frustrated by the situation they are in, recognize it. Then let them know that you are here to help them.

Let me give you a simple example. A customer comes into your shop with a flat tire. While a flat tire, to us, is really no big deal, to that customer it is a life-altering event! His or her day has just spiraled out of control. When that customer comes in and you sense that frustration, recognize it. Show empathy for the situation and reassure the customer that you are going to do everything you can to get them back on the road as quickly as possible.

This simple gesture will help relieve the stress the customer is feeling. Remember from earlier that customers will always remember how you made them feel.

Another byproduct of active listening with empathy is that you are much more likely to truly understand exactly what the customer wants or the problem they are having. This is going to lead to a much greater likelihood that your solution will be the right one.

Getting it right the first time is absolutely part of an exceptional experience. For example, if all you heard was that the customer had a vibration in the steering wheel at highway speeds, you would likely balance the tires.

However, if you did not hear the part that this situation only occurred under light braking at highway speeds, you did not solve the problem and now have only added to the customer's frustration.

Another thing that will help ensure that your team is delivering an exceptional experience is to make sure they are focused on the customer's convenience, not on their own. Here is an example of what I mean. If a customer asks if they can make an appointment, what response do they hear? Are they simply told the day and time of the next open appointment?

If your people are focusing on the customer's convenience, they would ask the customers when they would like to bring the vehicle in. You might be thinking, "What if we cannot do it at that time?"

That is a very valid question, but I want you to consider a couple of things. First, it is entirely possible that the customer would simply ask for the next available time. Secondly, is it possible that you could potentially fit the customer in when they wanted? You may need to ask for more time to complete the job and you may need to juggle some other things around. But in most cases, if you are really willing to try, you can make it happen.

Building a culture that is focused on the customer will help lead to other aspects of creating an exceptional experience. One such is keeping the customer informed. Keeping the customer in the loop early and often demonstrates respect.

When you make customers feel special, they become special customers.

Another is a sincere desire to exceed the customer's expectations and ensure that the customer is completely satisfied before they leave.

Again, there is a real difference between going through the motions and truly wanting to make sure everything is to the customer's liking. The thing is, as mentioned previously, the customer knows the difference. As such, they are likely just to say that everything was fine when it wasn't, if they feel that the person asking really did not care. They will just leave and not come back.

However, if the customer knows you are sincere, he or she will let you know the truth. If there was something that was not quite right, they know they can tell you and you will take care of it. This builds the trust that keeps the customer coming back.

So as you plan for what you want to achieve in 2021, consider how you will achieve it. Creating a customer-centric culture in your business is a sure-fire way to get you where you want to be and lead to the great success you deserve.

Just remember this little piece of wisdom: When you make customers feel special, they become special customers.



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