

Never Forget that Your Bottom-Line Profits are in the Hands of Your Front-Line Service Providers

By Eric Chester

Recently I happened upon a coupon for \$10 off an oil change and tire rotation at a nationally branded auto service center with a location not far from my house. I called the shop and after a half dozen rings, my call was answered by Dustin, who said that the soonest he could get me in was the following morning. I told him that I had a lunch appointment and that I'd have to have my car back by 11 o'clock. He promised that was no problem providing I brought it in before 8 a.m.

When the shop opened at 7:30 a.m. the following day, I was the first person through the door. I completed the paperwork and reiterated to early 20-something Dustin that I would be back by 11 a.m. He assured me that he had planned on me coming in and that this job is a snap, so I walked back to my office.

At 11:15, I headed back to the service center only to find that my car was still up on the jacks with all four tires removed.

"Dustin, what's the deal, man? You promised you'd have the work done and that I could pick it up 15 minutes ago!"

With a look of despair that seemed like he had given it a thousand times before, Dustin apologized profusely. When I pressed for an explanation, exasperatedly he confided in me as if I owned the place.

"I've been here for over a year and it's like this every day. Every day, man! They tell me to give friendly personal service to every customer and to suggest other things we can do for their car, but then they short staff me and I end up answering the phone every two to three minutes. There isn't even a voicemail system to help handle the barrage of calls that come in from the ads they place, so instead of handling the scheduled flow of cars and keeping things



Jon Hickey, senior arborist at 47-year TCIA member Lehman Plant Care Company, with Vennie Tsadilas, his long-time office manager.

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moving on the shop floor, I wind up with this phone glued to my ear trying to convince new customers to come in and very little time helping those we already have. This means we are constantly running behind and, ultimately, very few customers get the service they've been promised. Most leave less than happy. I say I'm sorry a thousand times a day while I pray for my shift to end."

I'm not a therapist, but it doesn't take Dr.

Phil to realize that Dustin is not going to be working there in six months. (Heck, I'd be surprised if he made it six more days.) And when he finally quits, the manager at this service center will attempt to find another front-line customer service cog to plug into his operational wheel of inefficiency.

It's a crying shame, too. Because if Dustin had just a little support from up above, he'd be a safe bet for long-term employment and his value would only increase with experience.

If management in this operation observed what I did, they'd be the ones listening to Dustin, and they'd most certainly provide him with the resources (another counter person, etc.) and the tools (voicemail, etc.) he needs to succeed. That would dramatically improve the service experience for this auto center's customers; the kind they'd tell their friends about. And those referrals from delighted customers would have a substantial

impact on revenues, decreasing their reliance on expensive couponing and marketing gimmicks to get new customers into the store; not to mention the repeat business they'd get from their existing customers.

Unfortunately, this story doesn't end like that. But yours can.

Here are three essential considerations you must act on to ensure that your front-line associates are able to provide the customer service experience you desire:

1. Arm your troops with the 3 T's – A respected general would never send his troops into battle without the weapons they need to survive and to win. Make certain your foot soldiers have the resources they require (tools, technology, & training) to provide the kind of service your customers deserve. Don't expect them to drive sales, service and profits for you until they are fully armed and adequately prepared to handle anything that comes their way.

2. When in doubt, overstaff – While you certainly want to keep an eye on your

labor costs, don't be penny-wise and pound-foolish by scheduling one front-liner to do the work of three, or three to do the work of five. This is a sure-fire way to disengage your service providers and burn them out well before their time.

3. Proactively listen to your people – You survey your customers and go out of your way to engage them and get their feedback, but do you go to the same lengths to gather feedback from your front-line associates? What instruments do you have in place to determine if you have a frustrated Dustin on your payroll that can't wait for his shift to end, or who have given up trying to delight your customers? Your managers should be proactively seeking this kind of employee feedback and – more importantly – acting on it. One of the most important questions that you can ask your associates is, "What do you need to do your job better?" Bill Marriott told me that one of the major reasons his hotels are consistently ranked as one of the Fortune Top 100 Great Places to Work is

that Marriott managers and supervisors are trained to ask that exact question of every employee, every shift.

Post note: Dustin apologized again when he called me at 12:18 p.m. to tell me that service to my car was finally completed. He said one of his auto techs went home sick and that he had to rotate the tires himself.

Eric Chester is an award-winning keynote speaker and author. His latest book, On Fire at Work: How Legendary Leaders Ignite Passion in their People without Burning Them Out, is set for release in early 2015. This article is based on one of two presentations he will make, "Grow a Better Workforce" and "On Fire at Work – How Legendary Leaders Ignite Passion," at Winter Management Conference 2015 in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, February 8-12, 2015. For a full WMC schedule, more information or to register, visit www.tcia.org/events/wmc-2015 or call 1-800-733-2622. 