

Resolve to Serve in 2009  
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Each January gives us a chance to reflect on the previous year. Varied New Year's resolutions are a result of this retrospective look. Most of us resolve to do things differently, and for those in service-oriented businesses, the nature of the current economic environment beckons us to not look backwards, but move forward with a focused determination to succeed. Our resolution for 2009 should be to serve our customers in a way to ensure their return, and ultimately create the type of goodwill to encourage positive comments about our company.

You have felt the impact, and likely adjusted your business model to contend with the economic environment of 2008. You might have even had to reduce staff levels in an effort to stay afloat. What are you doing with the staff that remains to ensure they are providing a welcoming presence and exceptional service to your valuable customers? Let's understand this very important truth, that each and every customer who chooses your company to patronize in today's environment is valuable.

Exceptional customer service may be the single most important factor to differentiate you from your competition. Today, beyond value and product, service ranks highest in the equation for most businesses. Exceptional service is not difficult to achieve. The trick is to get your employees to understand and embrace this concept. Each one of your employees is responsible for a function at your company. They *do* something specific to keep your company running. The question is, have they resolved to truly serve in 2009, and do they know what their purpose is? The answer should be quite clear: their purpose is to create a memorable and exceptional experience for the customer to have them walk out your door content with the service they received. This declaration of purpose should be non-negotiable, and as the company owner, you shouldn't ever compromise on this promise to your customer. Regardless of the industry you are in, customer service should be your priority this year.

The irony for many service-oriented companies is that service does *not* come first. Front line employees don't always seize the opportunity to serve the customer, yet we all know exceptional service is what will keep many companies alive in 2009. The most important thing you can provide your staff is understanding of their purpose, as a server, a host/hostess, a concierge, a tasting room rep., a gardener, a retail clerk, a valet, or any other service-related position at your company. Employees need to grasp the reasons for doing their job, beyond the obvious paycheck. Once employees understand your expectations of them to truly serve the customer and their value to your company, they will often work harder to exceed your customer service standards.

As we enter this New Year, ask yourself the following question: Do you cultivate a corporate culture requiring exceptional service? Here are some suggestions to help your frontline employees understand their purpose, and create the type of service to put your company ahead of your competition:

- 1) Define what service is to you. Know what your service expectations are and communicate them to your frontline employees. Make sure your employees know what you expect from them. Send out email broadcasts and/or a hard copy memo attached to paychecks or pay stubs describing your company's service levels. Hold regular company meetings to train, encourage and reinforce your service levels. Communicate your "no compromise of exceptional service" position. Celebrate success stories of your employee's dedication to service.
- 2) Model your service expectations in the interactions you have with your customers. Your employees will be watching you, so you will need to walk the walk, and talk the talk, in order for your expectations to be *real* to your employees. Influence their perception of what exceptional service looks like.
- 3) Develop and communicate examples of how to handle and resolve customer issues. Teach your frontline employees how to bounce back with effective service recovery. Allow your employees to feel comfortable resolving the issue and restoring customer goodwill. Make sure employees understand during each shift, who will be responsible for the next level of problem resolution. Ensure employees understand how some of the most meaningful gestures of hospitality are the easiest to create and cost virtually nothing to deliver.
- 4) Spend time with each employee sometime in the first couple of weeks of the New Year. Let them know how valued their position is. Discuss why their position is important in the scheme of things in the company. When your employees feel valued, they will pass this goodwill along to your customers.
- 5) Inspect what you expect of your employees. Wander around your company and catch your employees creating memorable experiences. Acknowledge your employees for their commitment to service. A public affirmation goes a long way with your employees.

Business owners can't afford to consider customer service anything but a priority. Service is the currency that keeps our economy moving, placing even more importance to the resolution of exceptional service in 2009.

Next month: Hiring the Hospitality Gene.

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