



Focus: Customer

by Lior Arussy

Passionate Employees - The Fast Track to Revenue Growth

I recently read an interesting story in the Times of London which I want to share with you. Barbara Boegner and Gustav Myburgh were on the way to their wedding chapel. Friends and family were already gathered in the church waiting for the bride and groom to arrive, but they were delayed. With no real explanation, the guests waited patiently for more than 45 minutes until the bride and groom arrived to tie the knot. The reason for the delay was not a traffic jam. In fact, what had happened was that Barbara and Gustav had observed three armed men holding a driver at a gun point. With the bride dressed in her white gown and the groom in his smart suit, they confronted the hijackers - who jumped into a truck and fled. The bride and groom chased after the hijackers and eventually caught up with and arrested the gunmen. What makes this story an inspiring one is that both the bride and the groom are law enforcement officers in the Johannesburg police force. They had a difficult choice to make, carry on and continue to the church to get married or deal with the gunmen. Their personal allegiance to their work guided their decision, which was made under difficult circumstances and within a split second. In a sense, their intuition guided them.

Barbara and Gustav represent a different type of employee - employees who come to work to fulfill a personal mission. They relate to their work as if they are on a personal calling. They derive personal meaning and fulfillment from their work, not merely a salary. They do not go to work reluctantly because this was the only way they could find to make money. Monetary compensation is only one dimension of their work, but not the only or primary one. The Johannesburg police force is blessed to have Barbara and Gustav among their law enforcement officers.

- What would your employees do in such a situation?
- Which calling would your employees follow when faced with stressful time-sensitive decisions - a higher mission or personal enjoyment?
- Do your employees limit their commitment their jobs to working hours?

If you need some time to think about the questions above, the answer is clear. Your employees are there to make money and then go home to spend it. Welcome to the world of interchangeable employees. The only reason they work for you is because they did not inherit Paris Hilton's trust fund or win the lottery. These employees are on your payroll because they have to be, not because they want to be.

The business implication of reluctant employees, those who did not win the lottery, is very serious one. At a time when employees create differentiation for your business, as products and services are rapidly being commoditized, the reluctant employee is counter productive. Reluctant employees do not care about delighting customers or innovative products; they are there to do a job. They are there to conduct transactions and complete interactions. They operate at a

functional level and not on an emotionally engaging level. Each time they touch a customer, you lose an opportunity to differentiate your products and create loyalty. They are more likely to reduce loyalty by providing careless service and boring experiences.

At this point you are probably asking yourself, “wait a minute, aren’t all employees like that?” Sure they are, if those are the people you hire. Obviously, Barbara and Gustav are not like that. And there are many more Barbara’s and Gustavs out there. But you need to search for them. You need to create a culture that will nurture their passion rather than stifle it.

One of the most common mistakes is to focus on customer experience strategies and take employees for granted. But a successful customer experience strategy calls for a different type of employee. Those employees who do not find meaning in their job will not be able to deliver the desired, differentiating experiences. Some employees work in jobs that truly do not fit their skills and passions. If they happen to be on your payroll, your customer experience strategy is doomed to fail. If these employees do not have it within them, they cannot deliver it to others.

Let’s take a smile, for example. Can you force someone to smile? The answer is “not really”. You have all seen faked, forced smiles on airplanes. They are more likely to upset you than to sooth you. Fake smiles are equivalent to forced sincerity, there is no such thing. This self contradicting term sounds fake even on paper. It cannot possibly be transmitted to others in real life - no matter what training you put your employees through.

The key to delightful customer experiences is passionate people on a mission. To recruit such people, you need to change the way you think about your workplace and the profile of people you seek to attract. As a rule of thumb, if they can work for you and for many other companies, they are probably, technically proficient, not passionate, people. This means that they can conduct a functional task, but not elevate a transaction to a memorable experience.

The right passionate people are the building blocks of our company, without them you are a commodity that will always fight for the next sliver of margin. Once you have recruited the right people, you must then build a culture of excellence and extraordinary performance. Building the right culture is difficult because it has to be authentic. Start by focusing on execution of extraordinary experiences and not completing the ordinary tasks. Raise the bar from executing ordinary performance to focusing on excellence. Share stories of excellent performance in your organization, publicly reward those who deliver it and surround your employees with the tools and authority to achieve this type of performance.

People do business with people. People create experiences. Yes, people may sometimes be more expensive. Passionate people may command higher salaries, but they also bring a much higher return in the form of more business with higher margin. They do not merely conduct business, they increase your value. Consider passionate people the same as you would an investment in research and development or the quality of your products. In today’s competitive environment, you must take advantage of every edge you can get. Passionate people are that edge. After all, wouldn’t you like to have Barbara and Gustav working for you?

Lior Arussy is the President of Strativity Group and the author of several books. His latest book is *Passionate & Profitable: Why Customers Strategies Fail and 10 Steps to Do Them Right!* (John Wiley & Sons, 2005). To learn more about customer strategies, sign up for Lior’s newsletter at www.StrativityGroup.com/knowledge.