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UNDERSTANDING THE HEART OF SERVICE

“The Service Gene”

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Service-intense industries such as healthcare, retail, restaurants, and hotels are always striving to create an exceptional service experience because they know the impact it has on sales and profits. Most of those companies also realize it is their people - the faces, hearts, and hands of the brand – that will ultimately deliver that experience. However, knowing it is important and executing on it are two entirely different things. We've examined what it takes to be successful at the service game and we are happy to share what we've learned.

The first thing to realize is that compliments are hard to come by as they require that you must not only deliver upon the customer's expectations, but actually exceed them. Complaints may provide insight into needed improvements so that a company can be satisfactory, but it is through compliments that you know you've reached greatness.

Armed with this knowledge, a 27 unit restaurant chain tracked the nature of customer email comments over a six month period. During that time, the 27 restaurants served 2.2 million customers. Customers complained 445 times and made 50 compliments. *All* of the compliments were about the attitudes and behavior of employees, while the complaints were evenly split among food, drink, and service. As a result, we can conclude that it is *the attitudes and behaviors of employees* that drive an experience so great that it results in a compliment.

“THE SERVICE GENE”

Employees who have a natural drive to serve others set the customer experience apart from the rest. And this may not be surprising to you. We probably all know at least a few people that clearly find great personal pleasure in taking care of others and want others to feel special. On the job, those individuals go above and beyond for customers – not because you trained them to do so or because you pay them a great salary to care more than the rest – they do it because they find enjoyment in it and would do it whether you told them to or not. Some call this the “service gene” or the “hospitality gene.” Obviously this is a valuable determinant in whether someone will be great at serving others, so we launched an investigation to figure out what special qualities cause people to be exceptionally great at it.

Almost without exception, you do not train adults to have the right attitude or to find enjoyment in serving others. By the time they are ready to apply for a job it's either in their blood or not, especially for the ones that will be truly exceptional.

As a result, our research was designed to identify exactly how people end up with the “service gene” and our investigation identified three core personal characteristics of what we call *Customer Service Drive*: personal energy, enthusiasm, and authenticity. These characteristics are the basis for creating a connection between employees and customers, and as we pointed out earlier, one source of a truly differentiated customer experience.

Our research ultimately revealed that employees with high *Customer Service Drive* are friendly, emotionally stable, and caring. They remain good-natured during their interactions with customers even in stressful situations, contribute to a positive customer experience, and significantly improve customer perceptions of service. In marketing terms, those characteristics make them *brand differentiators*.

BRAND DIFFERENTIATION THROUGH HIRING

Common sense suggests that employees with high *Customer Service Drive* are the exception, rather than the rule, in society at large. Therefore, it is safe to assume they will not dominate a company's workforce unless they are systematically hired, while excluding candidates without that drive. As a result, we created an assessment that would tap into the characteristics related to Customer Service Drive – having high energy, enthusiasm, and authenticity. We also needed to measure whether they are friendly, emotionally stable, and naturally caring.

Then, in order to test this measure of *Customer Service Drive*, we asked supervisors in several companies to rate their employees' performance. We found that the employees who scored high on our assessment were rated:

- 3.5 times more likely to show genuine excitement when meeting new people
- 3.5 times more likely to initiate feedback from customers
- 3.5 times more likely to show enthusiasm when responding to special requests
- 3.5 times more likely to demonstrate a "yes, I will take care of you" attitude
- 3.0 times more likely to individualize a customer's experience

These are important findings as they point to a significant opportunity for a company to differentiate itself through the simple act of hiring the right kinds of employees. The bottom line is that customers love to be loved, and employees with high *Customer Service Drive* meet that need and play a critical role in delivering a company's intended customer brand.

As it has always been, products don't sell themselves. Rather, customers buy products and services from people and companies who make them feel good about spending their money. As Walt Disney noted more than 60 years ago, "people spend money in the places that make them happy." These places are populated by employees who are driven to take care of customers. For these employees, customer care is a calling rather than an obligation. There is more to differentiating a customer experience than great products and services. The tie breaker is great employees who delight in taking care of customers – each and every time. When you hire someone who has the "service gene" and then do a superb job of training, it is a win-win for your business and the employee.

Curious to know how our assessments identify Customer Service Drive? Contact us – we'd love to chat!

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