



In The Center with Ivan Temes

Maintaining Service Loyalty during a Downsizing

Frontline staff can easily lose enthusiasm for satisfying customers during company closings and transitions. Here are some key steps to keep them motivated.

Is there a difference between motivating customer service staff when the business is going strong vs. during down times? This is a topic with which I've had much experience, having directed service organizations through each of the following scenarios:

- "The company is closing *today*. I'm sorry for the short notice." (Privada, 2001)
- "The company is closing the California office and relocating to Massachusetts." (Myteam.com, 2000)
- "The international division is merging with two other divisions." (JBL, 1995)
- "The entire division is closing in three

months." (Atari, 1983)

The uncertainty associated with these types of changes would seemingly have a negative impact on frontline service staff. But that doesn't have to be the case. For instance, in the previously mentioned situations, none of our customer care staff prematurely abandoned the company. They fought for our customers until the bitter end.

Supervisors Play a Key Role

The key to agent retention, loyalty and an ongoing proactive attitude is personal relationships. The one-on-one relationship between an agent and his or her direct supervisor has a greater impact on motivation than anything else in the organization.

Last year, *CCMReview* reported on a study by ProSci Research and cosponsored by Vanguard Communications Corp. The study found leadership skills to be the top-ranking criteria for supervisors (see "Leadership Skills No. 1 Criteria for Supervisors, Says Study," *CCMReview*, August 2001).

In addition, one of the top three lead-

ership skills that study participants considered necessary for call center supervisors was the ability to motivate agents through personal example. This is a concept I have tried to promote with my groups, as well.

Build a Solid Foundation before Change Occurs

What should you do when staff believes their jobs may be in jeopardy? If you've waited until hearing the rumbling, it's too late. Having been through several of the infamous California earthquakes, I like to use this analogy: If the original foundation is given proper attention, there is a better chance of the building staying intact. The same idea applies to motivating staff during times of change. *Service, motivation and spirit* must be addressed upfront to ensure loyalty and retention throughout transitions. Following are examples of how you can apply them in your center.

■ **Service.** If you were to ask your service staff what they most want from the organization, the answer they give may surprise you. It is not money. The most common answer I have heard is: "Remove the obstacles so I can be fully productive in satisfying my customers."

How do you identify the obstacles? *Ask the people involved.* There's no need for a formal survey, particularly if you need to involve the human resources organization. Instead, gather informal feedback by initiating one-on-one relationships with frontline staff. This shows people that you care and builds trust.

To my agents, I have always stressed: "You take the risk and I will take the blame." However, you have to back up your statements with real-life actions. Remember, building trust takes time.

■ **Motivation.** In their book *Driving Fear Out of the Workplace*, authors Kathleen Ryan and Daniel Oestreich

How to Keep Staff from Abandoning Ship

My first key learning experience about retaining staff during a downsizing occurred in the mid-1980s while working at Atari. An announcement was made to employees that our division would be closing in three months. My boss, John Reddoch, who directed a significant portion of the operation was faced with a major challenge – how could the company maintain productivity and results if employees began to leave in droves before the closing? He used an honest, common sense approach that was highly successful. I later used the same approach when faced with similar challenges managing the support organizations at Privada, Myteam.com and JBL. Here are the key elements:

- Be completely honest with your staff. In these types of situations, there is often a lack of specific information filtering down. Do your best to clarify these issues and give as many details as possible.
- Take the time to personally speak to each agent about his or her individual needs. (Do not delegate this responsibility!)
- Offer agents as much assistance and support as possible. I conducted mock interview sessions with interested staff during work hours to help them hone their interviewing skills.
- Communicate on a daily basis, even if nothing has changed. Frequent communication squelches rumors.

continued on page 10

Maintaining Service Loyalty

continued from page 9

interviewed employees in 350 companies. While all participants indicated they wanted to contribute to the success of the company, seven out of 10 employees also said they withheld creative ideas because they felt that no one cared or that there might be retribution.

How can you identify and overcome these types of motivation obstacles? *Ask the people involved.* Encourage your staff to offer their input and solutions – then take immediate action on their ideas. Show them that you are listening. They don't really expect everything to be fixed at once – just that things are moving in the right direction.

■ **Spirit.** Some businesses define spirituality as embodying the values of honesty, integrity and high-quality work. Webster's dictionary defines it as: "The vital principle or animating force believed to be within living beings." Animating force can be interpreted as the desire to grow. How do you identify the obstacles to agent growth? *Ask the people involved.* (Notice the pattern?)

Follow the ACT Principles

If you want your customer care staff to stay loyal when times are less than optimal, there are three steps you can follow. Just remember the acronym ACT.

■ **A** – Hire a positive *attitude*, particu-

larly when recruiting individuals who will be working directly with customers. Stew Leonard, president and CEO of the grocery store chain that has received worldwide acclaim for excellence in customer service and quality, says he hires only one out of every 16 people he interviews. Trust your intuition and be willing to do the extra work to find the right person.

■ **C** – Find people with *conation*. John McCormack, author of *Self-Made in America: Plain Talk for Plain People About the Meaning of Success*, points out that the current criteria most companies use for recruiting doesn't measure conation, which he calls "the will to succeed, the quest for success, that attitude which says, 'To stop me, you'll have to knock me down.'" Agents with conation will want to grow and develop – they'll also take the extra step on behalf of the customer.

■ **T** – *Trust, training, tools, teamwork* and *thank you*. Following are ways in which you can put these five concepts into play at your call center:

1. Ask each agent for any areas in which he or she would like to grow. Find a creative way to ensure that this is, at least, a small component of his or her job. Help your employees prepare for their next position, and your staff will learn to *trust* you.

2. Ensure each person receives the

training he or she needs to support customers. Trust agents to make the right decisions and allow them to learn from their mistakes.

3. **Tools** include technologies and processes. Ensure that your customer tracking, phone and email systems are ideal from the customer's perspective. Take the initiative to drive product feedback and improvement processes throughout the company.

4. **Teamwork** is critical. Don't compromise in this area. A group that works well together can be a source of inspiration to each other.

5. **Thank you.** Say it often – and publicly.

Too Soft and Simplistic?

If the concepts and ideas expressed in this article sound simplistic, consider a comment by Ralph Waldo Emerson: "People are astounded by common sense."

Caring and trust – soft stuff? No way. They are the foundation to service loyalty and customer satisfaction.

When accused by the press of pushing his players too hard to win, Denver Bronco's Head Coach Mike Shanahan replied, "When they know you care, you can push them." The players knew he cared and they trusted him.

Likewise, Tim Sanders, Chief Solutions Officer at Yahoo and author of *Love Is the Killer App: How to Win Business and Influence Friends*, refers to "love" as an absolute commitment to the growth of those around you.

So back to the opening question of this article: Is there a difference between motivating customer service staff when the business is going strong vs. during down times? The answer is no – there is no difference in good times or bad *if* you have built a solid foundation of trust, growth, personal relationships and the right staff. CCMReview

Provide Opportunities for Individual Agent Growth

To build employee loyalty and retention, you need a foundation of trust, caring and personal relationships. It's absolutely imperative that individuals have at least one area in which they feel they are growing. The supervisor can initiate it or the agent can take the lead.

New Focus Chairman Milton Chang gets right to the key point when he states, "In business it's all about people. If a company can provide an enabling opportunity for people to stretch toward their aspirations, they blossom, perform miracles and provide the company with the ultimate competitive advantage."

It can be very simple for managers to create a win/win for an employee and the customers. Here's an example: At Myteam.com, we were responsible for supporting youth sports organizations nationwide. Mike, one of our support reps, sheepishly asked me once, "Can I leave a little early on Thursdays?"

After I asked him why, he responded: "I'm coaching a kids' soccer team." Wow, an opportunity to market to our youth sports customers that we had a coach in our own department. Of course, my answer to Mike's request was a resounding "yes." He was extremely motivated – and it showed in his work. Customer compliments about Mike soared.

If others on the team thought Mike might be receiving special treatment (which they did not), I would have responded by putting this question to them: "What do you want so that you, too, can advance your personal interests as part of the job?"

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