

# Pay it forward

How to become a customer-focused company **Interviewed by Paul R. Harvey**

**N**o company is perfect, and, eventually, a big mistake may cost you a big customer. But when you begin losing customers over small issues, it may be a sign that it's time to revisit your commitment to being a customer-focused company.

When a trend of losing customers develops, many leaders make a beeline for their customer service department. After all, isn't it responsible for keeping clients satisfied? Not if your goal is to become customer-focused. The best customer-focused initiatives run from the top all the way down, and the speed at which customers run to your competitor is, in fact, directly related to the depth of their relationship with your front-line employees.

"When you have emotional connections with your customers, it really binds you together," says Kathy Riley Cuff, senior consulting partner, The Ken Blanchard Companies. "And to get that connection, your front-line employees have to be passionate — if you don't have great employees dealing with your clients, you're going to continue turning over customers."

*Smart Business* recently spoke with Cuff about why every company really is in the business of customer service and, while your products or services may bring customers to your door, how it's the relationships that keep them coming back.

## Is there a growth stage in organizations when customer service typically suffers?

Yes. It happens when a company tries to grow too big, too fast — bigger than its ability to manage the process. You've got to do your homework and have a plan.

A lot of successful companies are successful in spite of themselves. You might open up 10 new offices, but if your systems do not support that growth, your internal folks, your employees, are the ones that suffer, hearing the frustrations from external customers doing business with you. They'd like to serve the customer, but the current systems you have



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don't support them. You need to set them up for success so they can better serve the external customer.

## Can you describe an emotional customer connection?

Here's a grassroots example of building emotional connections. There's a little restaurant where I live, with good food and moderate prices. When my kids were young, if the restaurant wasn't busy, the owner would come over and take my kids and say 'come on kids, let's go look at the rabbits out the back door.' There were probably never any rabbits there, but the owner wanted to give us 10 minutes of peace and quiet at the table alone together.

What happened was, the times we went in and the service wasn't great or they were really busy and short-staffed, I was willing to make exceptions for that. I even got up and poured my own water. The moral of the story is if you don't have an emotional connection with your customers, it's much easier for them to find fault with you.

**KATHY RILEY CUFF** is a senior consulting partner with The Ken Blanchard Companies in San Diego. Reach her through The Ken Blanchard Companies Web site at [www.kenblanchard.com/cuff](http://www.kenblanchard.com/cuff).

## What is the most difficult aspect of creating a customer-focused company?

It's getting people to buy in from the top down and then getting them to live it. Top management must walk the talk and really be good role models to the service initiatives. They can't just say it and go along with it to appease others — they've got to be living it day in and day out and promoting the beliefs. Beliefs drive behaviors. For example, if you have a customer service department, everybody in the company may believe that department is the only one that deals with customer service. Instead, you have to get everybody in the organization to believe that it is everyone's responsibility to deliver service. The other difficult aspect is keeping it front of mind. This shouldn't be the training program of the month; you should be promoting that: We are going to be a customer-focused company, and we are going to consistently and persistently keep it in front of you.

## How can you turn front-line employees into customer-focused employees?

There's been a lot of research by my colleagues around the leadership profit chain. They found three aspects that make an organization vital, including financial success, employee passion and customer devotion. The results have shown a direct correlation between employee passion and customer devotion and, if you have those two, financial success happens.

Your people need to be asked for their input on things and need to feel like they're listened to and that their ideas matter. And I'm a true believer that there is very little information that should be withheld from your employees, because you want to create ownership in these folks — you want them to feel like this is their business. An employee who feels valued and supported by the systems is going to be happier dealing with your external customers. <<

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