



## Getting engaged

How can you engender effective 'employee engagement' in your organisation? Ian Luxford, head of learning services at Grass Roots, explains.

If outstanding customer service is a must for successful businesses today, achieving it is also one of the biggest challenges they face. The last decade has experienced a growing trend in educating staff within the workplace as part of a conscious effort made by employers to improve their employees' customer service skills to the best possible standard.

Many companies focus on enhancing the knowledge and skills of their staff about the products or services they are offering, in order to turn them into better customer service representatives. However, the intangible element that makes for successful customer interaction is employee engagement. Employees who are 'tuned in' to, and passionate about, what they do and who choose to give the best for their customers, will deliver a great experience.

The most iconic brands around today are not defined by the product they produce or the level of service with which they are associated. They succeed because their customers' experience of them is one that is special and which they can appreciate, enjoy and remember.

If customers are more than happy with the service they receive from a company, then it's more than likely they will use that company again. Furthermore, they will recommend it to others, thus enhancing the company's reputation.

However, if customers are dissatisfied, it's more than likely they will not use the company again. They will also tell others about their bad experience, thus damaging the reputation of the company. Hence employee engagement is vital to the survival of a business.

Despite its significance to a company, employers often overlook 'employee engagement' – believing that attitude is something which cannot be taught and, traditionally, organisations teach their people to do things. I can use the most effective methods of training to provide colleagues with the knowledge and skills they need to understand but, if this is all I do, it is unlikely that my customers will experience an exceptional customer service experience.

A great customer experience can only be delivered by someone who wants to give it. A greater knowledge and understanding of your company does not necessarily make you care any more about it. You need more than that.

Employers can only achieve 'employee engagement' by tapping into employees' emotions and getting them charged about the product or service they are offering. This is such an integral issue to the successful running of a business that many advanced companies now even have in-house teams that look after this issue.

At Grass Roots, we create learning programmes which address employees' attitudes and emotions, as well as their knowledge and skills. These include blended learning courses, incorporating face-to-face interaction with virtual computer based training and group-based, action learning. Action learning is a chance for employees to get together and relate what they have learnt in their day-to-day tasks, thus

creating numerous opportunities for individuals to actively engage with the challenge. This blend of learning offers a 'best of both' alternative to traditional interactive classroom sessions and virtual e-learning programmes.

Grass Roots has six key 'rules of engagement', which we implement into every programme we create:

#### 1. Start at the end

The objective of any training is for employees to gain experience that enables them to provide better levels of service. The first thing Grass Roots does is to understand the fundamentals of that experience – what it looks and feels like and how to make the experience real for the people who are learning how to deliver it.

#### 2. Infect

The second step is to 'infect', which is essentially a cascade effect within a company. People are influenced by their peers and immediate managers far more than they are influenced by their trainers. So, it's important that managers take some of the responsibility for getting the rest of the staff involved and then recognise individuals who have already taken the training on board. They can then equip them to engage others by making them part of the facilitation process.

#### 3. Recognise and reinforce

This recognises that positive attitudes spread quickly when there is overt recognition of people who do the right thing.

#### 4. Demand pull

'Demand pull' is about generating interest and promoting curiosity about what staff can do to give a great customer experience. Through this, you can open people's minds to the kind of learning they need. People will learn if they want to learn.

#### 5. Active, not passive

People will only engage with a subject if they are able to take actions and feel in control. Blended learning provides numerous opportunities for involvement and interaction.

#### 6. 'A little piece of me'

Finally, 'a little piece of me' works on the idea that there is no set formula for making the customer experience happen. By allowing everyone, at every level, to play some part in shaping the way it can be delivered you end up with a well developed solution. More importantly, it makes each individual employee feel valued and gives her/him a sense of importance. This is integral, because if your staff feel valued and understand how they are helping the customer – then they will be more inclined to do so effectively.

By Ian Luxford

### **Some examples of the 'six rules'**

1 Start at the end: Our work in O2 contact centres, addressing customer retention, started with the experiences that led customers to make the decision to stay and the ways in which customer service advisors knew that they could create this experience – engaging more of them with its delivery led to phenomenal increases in retention performance.

2 Infect: Our 'Above & Beyond' recognition scheme for Camelot, the operators of the UK national lottery aimed at equipping managers to promote the tangible recognition of employees who demonstrated role model behaviours which were in line with the organisation's brand and values. The scheme helped to strengthen Camelot's performance management system; gave employees a better understanding of how their work fits in with the strategic aims of their business, and helped managers assess how well employees performed against clearly defined goals.

3 Recognise and reinforce: The Camelot scheme allows managers to offer immediate rewards to staff who demonstrate their behaviours in practice. Since the launch in September 2005, nearly 500 'Above & Beyond' awards have been made and a subsequent survey showed that more staff thought their manager gave credit where credit was due.

6 'A little piece of me': Our award winning brand engagement work with InterContinental Hotels and Resorts gave staff at all levels within the organisation an experience in which they not only developed an understanding of, and passion for, what the brand was about, they also made decisions about what this meant for themselves in their day-to-day roles.

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