

Being customer-centric is perhaps more important than ever

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Norm Schultz

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Now is the time to renew efforts to be customer-centric in light of growing concerns about the coronavirus and the likely negative supply-chain issues from China and other countries. Clearly the positive 2020 outlook for our industry is becoming, well, less clear.

There's another trend that gives pause, too: Attendance for nearly all of the major winter boat shows has been reported down, albeit by relatively small margins. Still, that trend may be sending a message.

Moreover, when business is good, as it has been for seven-plus years, we tend to get comfortable and might let good business practices slide. Executing the moves to be a customer-centric dealership can be one of those practices that becomes less imperative when new customers keep coming through the door. But when the door doesn't open as often, it's time to recall that delivering the exceptional customer experience fosters brand loyalty and increases profitability.

Further, research confirms customers are often willing to pay more for great experiences, and satisfied customers are more likely to maintain a long-term relationship with a business, while also recommending it to others. And the cost of acquiring new customers is far greater than keeping old ones coming back.

Is it time to reinvigorate your commitment to being a customer-centric dealership?

Delivering customer-centric experiences should be a culturewide initiative. So says Denise Lee Yohn, writing in the *Harvard Business Review*. And perhaps the greatest barrier to customer-centricity is the lack or lapse of a customer-centric culture in the organization.

"At most companies the culture remains product-focused or sales-driven, or customer centricity is considered a priority only for certain functions, such as marketing," Yohn says.

"But to successfully implement a customer-centric strategy and operating model, a company

must have a culture that aligns with them, and leaders who deliberately cultivate the necessary mindset and values in their employees.”

Engaged employees are critical assets for any good customer experience effort, and all employees must be involved. Research of more than 200 companies revealed that front-line employees are the most engaged, while back-office personnel are often neglected in the customer engagement efforts. Interestingly, two-thirds of those companies indicated they surveyed their employees at least once a year. Unfortunately, less than half acted on the results.

The bottom line is greater customer-centricity starts at the top but must involve all. Here are some ways Yohn recommends to get employees excited and involved in creating customer-centric experiences.

1. Host brainstorm sessions

Bring all departments together to discuss possible ways to achieve a more customer-centric approach. Ideally, you want them to come up with ideas for putting the customer first that will directly tie into their own work. Be sure to explain how employees' contributions directly support the organization's goals of becoming more customer-centric and be completely committed to regular reinforcement of the initiative.

2. Encourage direct interactions with customers

Sure, the front-line employees interact with customers, but what about your service team, yard staff, accounting department and administrative staff? To ensure everyone understands the role they can play, arrange for all employees to have a chance to attend customer visits, or meet new customers or congratulate new buyers. In addition, employees who usually interact with customers should know they have the space and tools to resolve customer issues on the spot. Encourage employees to think beyond the typical company protocol to deliver above-and-beyond solutions or experiences.

3. Celebrate success

Yohn suggests building a customer-centric aspect into a reward or bonus structure. For example, reward an employee for proposing an idea that the dealership ends up implementing to improve the customer experience. The idea is to show employees that everyone can impact the user experience, and that the dealership's customer-centric culture rewards those who make a difference.

4. Quiz prospective employees

Be prepared to ask prospective employees about their experiences with customers. For example, ask about an instance that they provided above-and-beyond customer service or solved a problem. Their answer can be an important consideration, but it will also highlight the fact that the dealership wants customer-focused employees, even those who don't directly interact with customers on a daily basis.

In the end, all of a dealership's employees must be on board to become a genuine customer-centric business. A consistently engaged team in all departments will be the mark of a successful dealership in good times and, especially, in slower times.