

Inspire Loyalty in Customers, Protect Brand

By Lori Turner-Wilson

No marketing strategy can save a brand that fails to deliver on its brand promises. Absent customer service fundamentals, even the best-laid marketing plan will simply drive in one-time customers who wind up feeling duped in the end, likely sharing their unfortunate experiences. In the age of social media, it certainly doesn't take much time to share those experiences with thousands of people – mere seconds in fact.

So one must speculate why [Delta Air Lines Inc.](#), which is notorious for its poor service levels, had a profitable 2010.

At least in the Memphis market, one could argue Delta has little competition. If Southwest Airlines were to enter the marketplace, Delta would no doubt experience a strong and immediate reduction in market share with disgruntled customers anxious to make a move – any move.

Why the lack of loyalty? In 2010, the airline suffered the highest customer complaint rate of any national or regional airline and landed second to last in baggage handling. The company also placed on the “BusinessInsider.com” list of “Worst Companies” – claiming the No. 6 spot. The airline's inability to deliver on service fundamentals has customers clamoring for an exit strategy, paving the way for more service-focused competitors, like Southwest.

So what could Delta – or your company for that matter – do to inspire greater loyalty?

Leadership must clearly demonstrate in everyday actions that service is the priority for every customer every time.

When a flight goes terribly awry, and your call center receives a flood of complaints, the CEO should call each passenger and make it right. As company leader, you need to understand what family vacations you ruined and what business deals were lost because your airline didn't have its act together. It shouldn't be a barter system where the squeaky wheel gets the most concessions, which is what many Delta gate agents encourage you to do. Make it right for all, period.

Get employees and customers involved in creating service standards. Don't be gun-shy about selecting customers who have endured horrendous service experiences, either. Their candor has tremendous value if you will see it as such.

Train your front-line employees not to use the blame game. Hint: When it occurs, it's a nice glimpse into the poor culture inside your organization. Instead, create a culture of ownership. Reward employees who turn negative service experiences into loyal customers.

Train your employees not to throw their company under the bus when confronted by an unhappy customer, which just adds fuel to the fire. Teach them to take ownership on behalf of the airline and agree to immediately make it right. Empower them.

Before you invest in your brand's marketing, first take care of the service fundamentals. Roll up your sleeves, fearlessly ask your customers the tough questions, and fix what's broken – pronto – before you can't turn that loyalty around and your brand reputation is forever tarnished.

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