

# From employee engagement to employee

# ADVOCACY

Is employee engagement just another buzz word with too many meanings or can it be the final answer in the quest for the coveted prize of customer advocacy, writes *Dale Smith*.

It seems that every year 'putting the customer at the heart of the business', 'putting the customer first', and trying to achieve that 'halo of customer advocacy' is at the top of the must do list. So why is it, that many organisations are still struggling to put into practice the one thing that will ensure and secure their future prosperity. We all know the end point of our destination, but it is time to truly look at the road map that is required to reach this point. It all begins with your frontline people as they are the living version of your brand and your best asset to bring to life the promise that your customer expects when they engage with your organisation. This promise has been made through various mediums of marketing, promotions and even the colour of your logo strategically sends messages to the customer on what they can expect when they come in direct contact with your frontline people.

The projected personality of your business and how this brand individuality is driven through your people is crucial and must begin with their engagement to the organisation's values and vision. It is finding the balance between the tangible assets of the business that people buy (price, location, offerings) and the intangible assets that people engage with (people, culture, service). The tangible

ones may have little difference from your competitors, where as the intangibles ones if done well will live deep in the unconscious mind of customers. It is this business personality that customers will return for time and time again. It is no longer good enough to have customers say that they had a good experience, or give your customer service a high rating. The service has to be memorable at a much deeper level – your customers need to be using words like trust, comfortable, safe, honest, consistent, genuine and even a fun experience.

The people in the frontline must truly believe in the business, their role within it and the power that they have to make a real difference to the bottom line. It is not about engaging them with pure skill based learning, as the true root to a great customer experience comes from the heart, commitment, and the believable actions of your people. This true employee engagement starts with how they feel about the brand, the understanding of what it means to be a living brand representative and the responsibility that their role has within the overall success of the business. Invite them to be part of the process and give them the time and autonomy to develop their personalised view of the brand delivery. It is time to engage them at a much higher level of learning,

teach them something new, interesting and above all something that offers them the opportunity to grow as individuals within the business. Educate them more in marketing, communications, behavioural science and how the expectations and profiles of your customers have been derived. Excite them with learning and they will take that knowledge with them to both their role within the business and their personal life.

Like the movement of the markets and the diversity of your customer profile, your frontline people must have the elasticity of personality to manoeuvre through this crowded customer space. Customer service excellence is truly achieved when your people have the ability to interchange their performance with the individuality of your customer profiles and expectations of brand delivery. It is this inherent intuition that lends itself to that individual and personalised service that embeds deep in the unconscious mind of the customer. People like to be recognised for whom they are and why they have chosen to engage with your organisation. It is important to go beyond the internal view of brand and link your frontline team's service delivery to the brand that your customers buy. It is this extension into the world of marketing and brand visualisation that will allow them to better understand your customer.



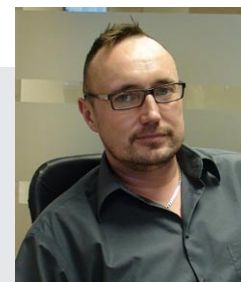
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*Dale Smith is Managing Director of BRIDGE TRAINING AND EVENTS and has been a training practitioner and customer service advocate for 15 years. Bridge promotes their BRAND2LIFE approach that ensures that all tiers of the organisation sing the brand and are proud to be part of the greater good and its culture.*



A brand has more than one corner to it and your customer may engage with it for different reasons and it is this insight that will allow your frontline people to truly see the bigger picture of your service personality. We tend to talk a lot about putting ourselves in the customer's shoes and less on what shoes the customer might be wearing and why. Of course we still need to teach the mechanics to do the job, however, if you are to create theatre then you need to understand the behaviour and mindset of your audience, and more importantly why they purchased a ticket to the show. Service personality is achieved when your frontline people have the combined skills to do the job and the ability to see and feel what is behind the brand offering. This living brand personality must then run throughout all areas of the business, and should be utilised

watching magic happen and without question that young man had just made a customer advocate.

To create true employee engagement, we must ensure that the frontline has a better understanding of the personality of the brand, before we ever begin to attempt to have them mirror it. The 'how to' to true employee engagement begins with giving them the opportunity to engage with the inner workings of the marketing team's vision of the brand and the expectations that customers have of it. Employee engagement starts with the word engage and once they are engaged with your company's values and external image, then you can begin to turn those words into true actions. Hence, if you want your employees to bring to life your service promise, then develop training initiatives that will ignite your people's creativity and passion

values and what it means to be a living brand for the organisation. Where the brand came from is important, but how its personality is channelled to the customer, and where it is going is priceless.

The next step I like to call the 'turning point' and this takes place once the employee is in the live environment of the role. It is at this stage that managers (brand coaches) strategically coach the employee using positive reinforcement and acknowledge when exceptional service has been delivered. It is linking this exceptional service back to the brand personality and further reinforcing the living brand mindset. Traditionally, coaching has been seen as a tool to develop employees on areas of needed improvement and hence tends to look at weaknesses in service delivery. With more positive reinforcement, it will embed the service personality and allow employees to attach a more confident approach to their own service personality match. The 'turning point' exists when frontline people truly feel connected and part of the living brand culture. To be a living brand does not mean that employees are cardboard cut outs of each other all wearing the same uniform. It is like them welcoming someone into their new home and it is this emotional connection and pride that will encourage them to take on the role of the 'gracious host' for the customer.

There is no time like the present to put in place learning initiatives that will ignite your employee engagement and ensure that customer advocacy is at the top of everyone's agenda. When value creation starts with your own people, it is imperative to attract, select and develop those with relevant talents and passion for the brand. Adopt and approach that ensures that all tiers of the organisation sing the brand and are proud to be part of the greater good and its culture. People that are connected to brand are better able to bring to life the service personality of the business and connect at a much higher emotional level with the customer. This intuition can be learned as it is established through better coaching, bespoke training and seeing the individual stones that make up the path to the customer's heart. The emotional intelligence of your frontline people is the best root to achieving the ultimate goal of true customer advocacy.

## TO TAKE AN EMPLOYEE TO THE STAGE THAT THEY ARE ABLE TO CREATE CUSTOMER ADVOCACY, YOU MUST FIRST DEVELOP AN EMPLOYEE THAT IS ALSO AN ADVOCATE OF THE BRAND

as a tool to unite people as one team.

I was sitting in a well known coffee shop chain the other day and was very interested to watch the performance of two frontline staff members. One offering the good standard and expected service, and the other, named Joe, was exceptional. The way he represented all corners of the brand and with great instinct changed his style with different customers. Without question he truly saw himself as a brand representative, as he was comfortable and happy to be working for this company. When the first staff member was asked by a customer if there was any chocolate cake – I was not surprised to hear the standard polite response. "Sorry, we are all out of chocolate cake today". However, later when asked a similar question, Joe had such an individual approach that even his language was different. He saw this as an opportunity to engage with the customer and find them an alternative that they would be happy with. The customer walked away with not only a large piece of carrot cake but was delighted with the experience. It was like

for the brand and not just the skills to do the job. That is not to say that the skills are not important, but it is how you weave them into a development plan that uses your own brand as the backdrop.

To take an employee to the stage that they are able to create customer advocacy, you must first develop an employee that is also an advocate of the brand. It is time that we break down this journey into a clear and defined development plan for employees and take them on a journey behind what the brand is really saying to customers. The first stage of this journey is to induct them into the brand culture and how brand value words and even its look and feeling have a deliverable personality. Half of this work should be already done if this 'match to values' has been part of the recruitment process. Note: The temptation of many organisations is to drift through this section of the induction and deliver a 'tell session' around the history of brand. This stage needs to be creative and allow the delegates the freedom and opportunity to explore the brand