



July  
2008

Page 1 of 2

## The Employee-Customer Connection

By *Bill Catlette and Richard Hadden*

There are few connections in the world of business clearer than the one between how an organization treats its employees and how those employees treat their customers. As Bill Black, former CEO of Canada's Maritime Life Assurance Co., once said, "We're not running a country club around here, but we *are* in a service industry, and the best way to have happy customers is to have happy employees."

Though the connection between joint employee and customer satisfaction isn't 100 percent, it is patently clear that you can hardly have happy customers with disgruntled employees serving them. Just ask most air travelers. Yep, there's an awful lot of bad customer service out there. But it's not due to a shortage of books and seminars to teach the unenlightened how to be nice to people trying desperately to give them their money. And it's not because customer service employees are innately rude. OK, some are, but most aren't. Where service is lousy, it's often because managers haven't equipped their employees to provide the good service that they'd like to believe differentiates them.

Research into service providers that understand the employee-customer connection suggests that you can substantially improve customer service in at least three ways:

### 1. Give employees reasons to be proud:

People truly want to take pride in their work. Good chefs get their thrills creating great meals and then watching appreciative guests devour the food. But if that chef has to make do with third-rate meats purchased by a stingy or ignorant corporate buyer, the chef can't help but fail. Ditto for the server who brings the sub-prime steak to the table.

Whether you're selling food, freight service, hotel rooms, computer operating systems, or any other product or service, the employee who makes, sells, delivers, or services a high-quality product is going to have a better day at work than the one who has to associate with schlock stuff.

One factor that has propelled Rochester, New York-based Wegman's Supermarkets to a position at or near the top of Fortune's list of "100 Best Companies to Work For" for more than a decade is a distinctive commitment to customer service. That's right. Rather than creating an added burden on employees who are expected to go out of their way to serve customers, Wegman's high service standards actually improve working conditions for their employees.

"This is hard work," a Wegman's employee told us on a recent store visit, "but what makes it worth it is that our customers are great. They love shopping here, and that makes me feel good about what I do ... even if I'm worn out at the end of the day."

### 2. Create the connection

No one can possibly put everything they've got into their job until they see how their daily work benefits the end customer.

Lots of workers have this opportunity, first-hand, every day; nurses, auto mechanics, realtors, HVAC installers, your morning barista. The list goes on and on, but it's shorter than the list of those who, in the regular course of their work, never, ever, have an encounter with a real paying customer - those millions of people working diligently in factories, back offices, and elsewhere, supporting the work that touches the customer.

When the employee-customer connection isn't obvious, sometimes leaders have to create it.

Morale was low, error rates were high, and employee turnover was rampant in a factory where workers made hospital products-specifically, tubing assemblies used to deliver intravenous medication, fluids, and nutrition to patients.



The HR Department sweetened the benefits pot, and hired a team of consultants to implement such techniques as job variety and job enhancement. Nothing changed.

Finally someone decided to put all the factory workers on a big yellow school bus, and take them to the nearest hospital, where everyone could see, at work, these tubing assemblies they make all day. When they witnessed the very tubes their hands had wrought being used to deliver lifesaving medication and nourishment to patients, that's when things turned around. People came away saying, "So *that's* what we do. Now we see why we come to work every day." Within weeks, morale rose markedly, as did quality. Turnover dropped, and people began to work with an energy the plant manager had never seen before - because someone *created* an employee-customer connection.

### 3. Get the system off their backs

In most organizations, there's a substantial disconnect between those who make corporate policy and those who are tasked with delivering customer service. If you're a member of the former group, remember that good employees won't suffer dumb systems.

The late great management thinker Peter Drucker once opined that, "Ninety percent of what we call 'management' consists of making it difficult for people to get things done."

A national chain of café/bookstores has a rigid policy requiring multiple levels of approval for the purchase of any piece of equipment costing more than \$100. As a result, when, for example, a commercial bagel toaster toasts its last, it takes nearly a month to replace it. During that month, the attendants at its understaffed counters have to make do with inadequate equipment and apologize to every customer for why their service is even slower than usual.

By contrast, organizations that experience high degrees of employee engagement take deliberate, preemptive steps to avoid putting their workers in the line of fire of angry customers.

Nowhere is this ideal violated more frequently or more egregiously than in the realm of customer service call centers.

The quality of a call center employee's workplace experience varies directly with that of the customer's service experience, and inversely with the number of minutes spent on hold and the number of touch-tone qualifying prompts required to reach a human with a brain set to the "on" position.

Face it, by the time your customer has answered 20 electronic questions and waited 30 minutes listening to a recording of how important their business is to you, when they *do* finally reach a real person, they can't help but take out their frustrations on your service rep - the one person in your company *least* responsible for the asinine system that so provoked your customer. The number one reason for high call center turnover is the daily wearing down of the spirits of employees by a system that serves customers poorly, and which employees are powerless to change.

If you're hiring right in the first place, your people want to do good work and deliver great customer service. But after the new wears off the job, they can only continue to do so if they are able to take real pride in what they do, if they see a direct connection between their work and real paying customers, and with systems that allow them to do their very best work.

*Bill Catlette and Richard Hadden are the authors of the newly released, "Contented Cows MOOve Faster." The two founded Contented Cow Partners, LLC to help business and organization leaders produce better results through a focused, fired-up and capably led workforce. For more information, visit [www.ContentedCows.com](http://www.ContentedCows.com).*

