

# Sales and Service Excellence

Volume 12 Number 9

The Magazine of Team Leadership

September 2012

SERVICE/CUSTOMERS

## Raving Fan Customers

*Creating customer-focused teams.*



by Bruce Hodes

**W**HAT'S A CUSTOMER-FOCUSED team? The word *team* is overused in business; it gets applied to any group. In *The Wisdom of Teams*, Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith define a *team* as a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable. The key words are common purpose and mutually accountable. Without these, you don't have a team.

Also, for a team to exist there has to be adversity, challenge and tension between the team and attaining a common purpose. No adversity and challenge means *no team*. You don't need teams for easy tasks. Tough challenges and high performance standards—like those associated with customer service, quality and profitability—are essential for teams to come together and coalesce. Having customers consistently be raving fans of the company's service is certainly a challenging and lofty goal.

### What is a Raving Fan Customer?

A *raving fan customer* is one who is excited about the company's service delivery and product way beyond normal. RFCs remain loyal given price pressure from competition. They would go through a lot to get the company's service. Even a price increase would keep raving fans loyal buyers. RFCs would wait in long lines; pay extra shipping fees; all for the service or product that their favorite company offers.

When you earn RFCs, you gain a *strategic advantage* over competition. Ask Zappos, Southwest Airlines, Apple, or Jimmie Buffett. Your customers will buy from you *no matter what*. Your company becomes a monopoly, the ultimate positioning! We see this with Apple's iPhones. Apple customers are disdainful of other smartphone products.

**To create customer-focused teams, employees must understand that they win when the customers win.** The *customer win* has to be defined so that the *company also wins*. If you ask customers



what they want, they'll tell you I want the service and product *for nothing*. So the *raving fan service strategy* needs to be designed so that the company can stay in business and its employees can deliver. Apple products are easy to use, and their informed employees can teach consumers how to use them. All this conspires to make *raving fans* of Apple customers. Every service strategy needs to be designed so that this concept is constantly reinforced.

Employees who directly impact customers need feedback to know what they are doing right (and wrong) in creating RFCs, coordinate and fix problems with other departments that impact

delivery, and ensure that customers perceive great value from products and services they receive.

**Two challenges exist** in creating high performance, customer-focused teams: 1) getting the voice of the customer clearly delivered to the front line regarding the service or product—create forums for the front line to listen to the customer; and 2) making sure everyone understands the standards by which customer service is measured.

### Five Stages of Team Development

I see five stages of development for customer-focused teams:

**Stage 1. Getting to know you:** feeling that *customer service* could be fun combined with anxiety about how to do it; excitement about the concept of team; figuring out who is in charge; clarifying rules and developing standards; dependence on the *coach/leader*; and *coach/leader* uses a directive approach.

**Stage 2. Wish we weren't here:** Feeling that this is *not fun*; leadership and members are screwed up; feeling that *something is definitely wrong here*; feeling uncertain and incapable; performance standards not being met and finger pointing; little agreement among team members regarding standards; *customer focus* is rhetoric only; internal strife and no sense of mutual accountability; task-driven but many individual agendas; performance standards not agreed on.

**Stage 3. Getting behind the game:** performance standards hammered out; increasing ownership of standards; decreasing hostility as the team begins working out differences; focus on customers; starting to feel comfortable with mutual accountability; positive feedback from customers; more *honesty*

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among team members; failing forward—learning and improving from trial and error; with rapid recovery from mistakes; enthusiasm and energy increase; support for each other is evident; and small wins bring large smiles.

**Stage 4. High performance and raving fan service:** customers are consistently impressed by the service and product; team standards are met and moved outwardly by the team; members feeling good about consistency; shared leadership; open and honest communication; meetings feature straight talk; results are recognized by customers as *high performance*; members feel deep concern for each other's personal growth and success; the team outperforms reasonable expectations; and team members have fun.

**Stage 5. The times are a-changing.** A major change occurs, such as members joining or leaving, a new coach, new standards; confusion; uncertainty regarding the implications of change.

Here are four points to remember:

**1. Customer-focused teams and victims (people who refuse responsibility and**

**accountability for their behavior) don't go together.** Members must want to make the team successful. You can't create a team with victims.

**2. Enemies and customer-focused teams do not go together.** Team members must have a basic regard for each other. They do not have to love each other, but at minimum they should have mutual professional respect.

**3. Expect conflict.** Since performance standards are high, team members will have differing views on how to achieve them. Open dialogue is useful. It doesn't matter *who is right*, only that *the customer is served in an extraordinary fashion*.

**4. Experiment.** Customer service strategies need to be planned, but it helps to be flexible and try new ideas that will make your organization indispensable to the people it serves.

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**ACTION: Create a customer-focused team.**

## Volume 12 Issue 9

*Sales & Service Excellence* is published monthly by Executive Excellence Publishing, LLC (dba Leadership Excellence), 1806 North 1120 West, Provo, UT 84604.

### Editorial Purpose:

*Our mission is to promote personal and professional development based on constructive values, sound ethics, and timeless principles.*

### Basic Annual Rate:

\$59 (12 issues)  
\$119 two years (24 issues).

### Article Reprints:

For reprints of 100 or more, please contact the editorial department at 1-801-375-4060 or email [CustomerService@LeaderExcel.com](mailto:CustomerService@LeaderExcel.com).  
Permission PDF: US \$100

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Internet Address: [www.LeaderExcel.com](http://www.LeaderExcel.com)

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