

FROM THE TRENCHES | BY MYRNA SISLEN

The Greeting Battle

I realized that something was terribly wrong when I placed an ad on Craigslist for a new employee. One of my current staffers asked if she could write it. I agreed and she wrote, “We are a very congenial group where everyone is a musician, and we all help each other ...” The word “work” did not appear anywhere in her version of the posting. Of course I changed it.

A day or so later, I arrived at my store, and, as I was parking my car, I noticed a man walk into the store with his son. I watched them, while I slowly gathered my stuff and walked our store dog, Mozart, before heading into the shop myself. There were five of my employees behind the counter, happily engrossed in “congenial” conversation, while the customer and his son wandered unnoticed in the aisles. I went immediately to them and asked if I could help. The father answered, “I would like to buy a guitar for my son.”

Well, I have watched “The Dog Whisperer” enough to know that if the dog misbehaves, it’s always the fault of the owner. Not that I see my staff as canines, of course, but what kind of culture had I created that would make their behavior acceptable? So acceptable that even my coming into the store didn’t embarrass them into helping the customer.

Something needed to be done immediately. But what? It’s not that I hadn’t mentioned greeting customers before. I had — about a million times. Obviously they hadn’t gotten the message.

THE FIX

I discussed the issue with several colleagues, who all had the same suggestion: Put them on commission and that will solve the problem. I decided to do the opposite.

First, I had “the talk” with each one. I explained how important customer service is to a store like ours, and that all I am asking is for them to do the following: When a customer enters the store (a bell actually rings when the door opens), I want to see all heads turn. I don’t care what you are doing: the customer takes precedence over everything. All you have to do is walk over and say, “Hello, if there is anything we

can do to help, let us know.” If they don’t have questions, go back to whatever you were doing.

But that meant they had to walk over to the customer, not shout from behind the counter.

I asked them, “How important is greeting the customer? Well, how long do you want to be in business? How long do you want to keep getting paid?” If I am in the store, and I get to the customer before you do, you are not doing your job.”

I not only gave each of them the talk, I gave each of them a raise, too, contingent on their customer-response time.

I know this sounds crazy from a motivational standpoint. It was working for a while, but one day, when there were four employees busily working and a customer entered the store, not one head turned except mine. It broke my heart, but I realized that there needed to be a bit more tweaking. I added another component, which really has seemed to work.

After my old store manager left, I had not named another one. I corrected this as well as named an assistant store manager and department managers. Now we’re running like a well-oiled machine. The combination of monetary incentive and defined positions has resulted in customer service that pleases even me. **MI**

Myrna Sislen owns and operates Middle C Music in Washington, D.C.



Continually reminding your staff to greet customers is not the only form of motivation