



*We exist to serve others so they may better serve the world.*®

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*July 10, 2011*

## **The Most Important Thing**

I have two confessions to make. One is...I am a huge fan of Zappos.com. So much so that I am dedicating a large chunk of this article to their renowned service culture. Every time I meet someone who has shopped at Zappos.com, the reaction is always the same, “I love Zappos!”, “They are the best”, etc. For those who don’t know, Zappos.com is a successful online shoe and apparel retailer. My second confession is, as this article is being written (June 27, 2011), I have never actually shopped at Zappos.com, although I intend to whenever I get a moment. In case you are wondering why I seem to be such a staunch advocate of their brand without personally shopping their yet, the answer is simple. They understand the most important ingredient needed in order to build a world-class service culture.

*...service must be the most important thing your company does.*

Here it is: If your goal is to create an iconic and renowned service culture in your company, then service must be **The Most Important Thing Your Company Does**. Now, I don’t mean that you work in a restaurant company that provides great service, or a nursing home that provides great service. I mean that, instead, you work in a great service company that operates restaurants or a great service company that runs nursing homes. The paradigm shift for those who truly understand (or “get it”) is monumental. I worked at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company from 1996-2006, and throughout most of my time there, the senior leaders were emphatic that we were, first and foremost, a “service company”. A service company that happened to manage hotels, restaurants and spas. The same is true for Zappos.com. That mindset pervades everything about their business from how they treat their employees to how they serve their customers. It even translates to how they relate with their vendors (vendor appreciation parties and other perks)!

So, the fundamental questions in this article are:

- What would happen if service excellence becomes the **Most Important Thing** your company does?
- How will your workforce see and feel the new emphasis on service?
- How will your customers see and feel the new emphasis on service?
- How would your hiring and orientation processes change?
- How would the selection of services your company offers change?
- How would the delivery of those services change?

Tony Hseig is the CEO of Zappos.com and in his book, “Delivering Happiness”, he recounted the exact moment that he and his team decided that service would be the **Most Important Thing** they would do.

He wrote, *“Even though it would hurt our growth, we decided to cut most of our marketing expenses, and refocused our efforts on trying to get the customers who had already bought from us to purchase again and more frequently. Little did we know that this was actually a blessing in disguise, as it forced us to focus more on delivering better customer service. In 2003, we would decide to make customer service the focus of the company.”*

Tony went on to explain, *“Our philosophy has been to take most of the money we would have spent on paid advertising and invest it into customer service and the customer experience instead, letting our customers do the marketing for us through word-of-mouth”*. After reading that passage, I began to wonder about how powerful it would be if businesses truly understood the positive ramifications of that quote.

All this sounds good, but you are probably wondering how this shift can manifest itself into customer-focused service processes. Here is one of many examples from Zappos.com (also from the book, *Delivering Happiness*).

*“An example of us using the telephone as a branding device is what happens when a customer calls looking for a specific style of shoes in a specific size that we’re out of stock on. In those instances, every rep is trained to research at least three competitors’ websites, and if the shoe is found in stock to direct the customer to the competitor. Obviously, in those situations, we lose the sale. But we’re not trying to maximize each and every transaction. Instead, we’re trying to build a lifelong relationship with each customer, one phone call at a time.”*

*...we’re trying to build a lifelong relationship with each customer.*

Hopefully, the message is resonating with you by now...the most effective way to build a service culture is to clearly make service the **Most Important Thing** your company does. Of course, you still have to execute your core business flawlessly whether it’s a spa, hospital, or an airline. Massages, clinical procedures, and landing airplanes still must be done with excellence.

In the Washington DC metro area, there is a chain of grocery stores called “MOM’s Organic Market”. While their company mission is to protect and restore the environment, it is obvious that providing exceptional service is vital to their business success. We are fortunate to have a MOM’s store not far from where we live, and I try to visit at least a few times per month. Recently, I decided to visit the store to buy a brand of organic milk. It was around 8:20AM, so I assumed that the store was already open. When I arrived to the store, however, the sliding glass doors at the entrance didn’t open (gasp!). I then looked at the hours of operation on the front door and it clearly stated that the store opens at 9AM. Before I could turn to walk away, a store employee came rushing to the front door, unlocked it, opened it and gave me a big “Good Morning! Come on in.” I was a bit confused, but delighted at the same time. Then when I actually got inside, I noticed that there were at least two other shoppers already picking up groceries. Of course, I had to ask the store employee why the store opened before 9AM, and he said, “Because we try to open as early as possible to accommodate those customers who need to stop in before

they go to work. By the way, please watch your step because we are still mopping and getting prepared to officially open at 9.” Wow.

After I commented to him how impressed I was with the store’s service-centric philosophy, he went on to tell me that just yesterday, one elderly shopper forgot her credit card at the cash register. One of the store employees knew where she lived in the neighborhood and volunteered to take it to her house. Wow times two!

There is something special about taking service seriously. It is important to honor that all people crave to feel appreciated and taken care of. By declaring (not suggesting, recommending or inferring), but steadfastly declaring that service is **WHAT WE DO**, you are automatically separating your company from the competition. Those exceptional service companies will be the ones that will continue to increase their market share, retain their best employees and win over the hearts of their customers. Is service **THE MOST** important thing you do?

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