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Written by: Bryan K. Williams, D.M.

December 12, 2011

Earn and Re-Earn Your Customers' Loyalty

When I am traveling in the U.S., my favorite airline is Southwest Airlines. It is very obvious to me that Southwest understands that customer service is more than just a public relations statement. For example, they give you the option of having a customer service phone representative call you back instead of waiting on hold for a long time. Just recently, I had two business trips that required me to seek out other airlines because Southwest did not provide flights to those cities. So I flew on two different airlines, and both failed...miserably. Not only did they not earn my interest to fly with them again, but

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they actually did things to effectively "turn me off". The purpose of this article, however, is not to bash those two airlines, but rather to re-focus on how certain missed opportunities could have turned into WOW moments, thus repeat business.

Let's start with the first airline. Keep in mind that it may have been the second time that I had flown with them in the last six or seven years. I was on a flight from Baltimore to Chicago and just before the plane door closed, I noticed that over half of the seats were empty. I was in a row with one other passenger, so I decided to move to one of the several empty rows. That way, I could spread out and have ample space to write, read, use my laptop, etc. As I was moving to the adjacent empty row, I heard someone, from a distance, say "No, no, no!" I looked up to see that it was a flight attendant who was speaking to me...plus she was waving her index finger from side to side for added effect. "You have to return to your seat sir!" So, of course, I returned to my seat a bit embarrassed, confused, and annoyed all at the same time. To her credit, she did come to me afterwards to explain why she turned me away from the empty seat.

"Those seats you were going to are premium seats. They have more legroom and there's a charge to sit there." Then she walked away. Ok. I'm sure that she didn't make up that rule or create the flight seat inventory system that allocates "premium seats", but the delivery of the message could have been done more respectfully versus the manner she chose.

On a deeper level, however, why couldn't the airline simply empower their flight attendants to invite passengers to open seats once it had been determined that no more passengers are coming onboard. Hey, maybe I would have fallen in love with the extra leg room and told other people about the great seats that the airline has. Or better yet, before I even boarded the plane, the gate agents could have proactively moved passengers to the premium seats once it was clear that those seats would be available. Imagine how impressed passengers would be if the gate agent told some of the fortunate passengers that they were being "upgraded" since there was more than enough room on the flight.

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Such a gesture would have been worth more than any television or newspaper ad. Customers can always tell when an organization is relationship-driven versus revenue-driven. It was clear that the airline was purely focused on revenue.

On the first leg of another flight, the entire staff seemed like they hated their jobs. Everyone, from the gate agents, to the flight attendants had no smile and barely gave customers any eye contact. When traveling with my baby daughter, I usually check her stroller at the gate versus checking it in as luggage. Since the stroller bag is very large, it, can easily be mistaken for checked luggage by the plane's baggage handlers. So to avoid the potential confusion, I asked the gate attendant for two bag tags versus the customary one tag that is given. That way, the stroller bag could be easier to identify. The gate agent proceeded to roll her eyes at me, mumbled something under her breath and put the two tags on the desk for me to take. Wow.

That same episode could have been re-mixed to get a vastly different outcome. After explaining my situation and asking for the extra bag ticket, the attendant could have:

1. Listened attentively
2. Empathized with the situation (or at least pretended to do so)
3. Given me the tags (or even offered to put them on for me)
4. Wished me a great flight and stated that she hoped that there would be no confusion with my stroller bag during the trip

So there you have it. Two airlines...two missed opportunities to earn my loyalty. It really is a shame, because those airlines, like so many other companies, will look at their financial statements, then notice that revenue and profit are both down. Inevitably, the next steps will usually include a mixture of more advertising, raising prices, laying off staff and charging for things that were previously complimentary.

Instead, companies can win more business by simply re-focusing on the customers' experience. Train and communicate to all staff that the team's mission is to earn the customers' loyalty every day at each touchpoint. Remove restrictions and empower your team to do everything possible to WOW their customers.

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Get with your team and brainstorm various scenarios and how deposits could be made. In short, wow your customers, cherish your customers and honor your customers. They have a choice and you can't take for granted or assume that they will choose you. Adopt an attitude of re-earning your customers' loyalty everyday. Your team will be happier, your customers will be happier, and your company will be happier too.

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