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Return of Service

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Mark Abbot Consulting Ltd is all about developing a cycle of enterprising success for those organisations who partner with us. Our objective is to enable such organisations to extract the maximum benefit and value from the business they engage in; to explore new avenues for success; and to assist in understanding what opportunities are available and what these can lead to.

I have rediscovered great customer service and in one of the very places that it probably all started.

Of course we'd expect to be overwhelmed with great service at upmarket stores while being relieved of vast quantities of cash, but just how often do those two events fail to occur simultaneously?

For everyday transactions we generally expect everyday service, but I've rediscovered something different at my local butcher-shop. It's just a small operation with a loyal following of locals and through-traffic trade. It underwent a change of ownership a few months ago and the result has been surprising. Not that there was anything wrong with the last butcher – he treated me quite well – but nothing like this one. There is nothing contrived, nothing scripted, nothing forced; the service mantra is simply a natural part of what they do.

Every aspect of this business is directed at service, which may seem quite obvious, but for a small business this is often far from the norm. A small retailer or manufacturer has flexibility and no need to worry about constraint theories; lean manufacturing; quantum dynamic methodologies and other old and new-age organisational drivers. It's no big deal to put down the cleaver and pack a few sausages for this customer, or bag a couple of chops for another. It's certainly not an optimised process flow, but a necessary one given the relatively small number of staff who are essentially multi-skilled and multi-taskers.

The apprentice is one of the most interesting finds at this store. She has an enthusiasm and personality that would be the envy of most retailers – large or small. Difference is that she was probably selected based on her interest in cutting and packaging meat, not her ability to work the till and up-sell, as would be the training regime in most places, with appropriate manuals to match.

Just to take a small distraction here, and by way of comparison, my daughter had her heart set on a pair of expensive shoes on display at an up-market department store. Surely at a place like this the sales folk are recruited on the basis of their ability to sell; their interest in the customer; their skill in securing the deal? It would appear not. The sales girl, or perhaps she was a "customer consultant" I'm not sure, seemed more intent on calculating her previous day's commission than closing what should have been an easy sale. Fortunately she only had three dockets to calculate and it would appear that her little brain may have been struggling with that quantum. Unsurprisingly, we walked, saving her the difficulty with further calculations.

So why is it that my butcher's apprentice can really serve, and generate repeat business, when it's not her job, and someone employed to do that very thing, just can't?

For the sales role it's based on selection and recruitment. I recall several years ago an article on the recruitment strategy at Disneyland parks. (Several office moves later and in spite of endless Googling I just can't locate its reference) They don't pay any more than the "average" wage but they focus their attention on hiring staff with an affinity for people; those who are prepared to go that little bit extra to make the customer experience just a little more satisfying. And while training is a definitely given these representatives have a natural predisposition to make the most of the job they are in. Having an interest in fashion doesn't necessarily mean the ability to sell it. Having an interest in meat doesn't necessarily mean the ability to sell that, either, but having an interest in people is probably just enough to start closing the loop. For now, anyway, I am pleased that my butcher is happy being in the meat business. I only wish that others who should be delivering to the same standards would take a look at his operating model.

The lesson from this is that in our current call-centre frenzied, relationship management seminar, CRM-monitoring and updating, client scanning and surveying, and all other general worshipping activities that tend to focus more on the supply-side than demand generating is more than in need of a shakeup itself. Of course we gather great information from these activities and the challenge is to apply those findings. Where the objective is simply to measure and track "time-to-respond" or number of clients "processed" the risk is that we maintain a very introspective view of what customer service is and fail to deliver it accordingly. When we start to match this with the quality of service offered, along with the total customer experience, we start to get somewhere. But this needs to be integrated where service delivery is an inherent component of each and every activity, not the domain of a stand-alone "Customer Service Department".

You could argue that specialty store or service providers need to work harder on customer delivery because they don't have the luxury of multiple product ranges and least-cost operating models to generate demand. After all, it's surely easier to stock up at one location than make numerous and specific visits. But not all small operators achieve this, perhaps thinking that a select product or service line will be enough to generate a reasonable life-style. Sadly, they are as likely to fail as the large operator who takes their eyes off the clients walking through their doors. Policies and procedures that are aimed at improving or enhancing service delivery are about as far removed as the notion of "educated leadership" without the genuine and ingrained desire of those working in or for the establishment to serve.

So back to the lesson; the small-operator success stories, where the foundation for service originated, can be applied to larger organisations and in both products and services. Managers with a focus on cost-minimisation through their hiring policies may just need to rethink their approach; I know that the financial benefit of true service orientation will more than compensate for it – just ask my butcher.

