



Turn Your
Employees
into Brand
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In past generations, company loyalty boomed. There's a good chance your grandfather worked for one company for decades, retiring from the same place he began his career. It's not the same for today's workforce though. Company loyalty has diminished, and with good reason. Today's workers have seen large-scale job cuts, including cuts to workers who spent their entire careers with one company. For these disheartened employees, loyalty is a thing of the past. Workers today can expect to have as many as nine jobs between the ages of 18 and 36 according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹

So how do you overcome this loss of loyalty and nurture it in your employees? And more importantly, why should you?

Because. Your employees are the voice of your brand. They represent your company each day as they interact with current and potential customers. Each time your employees interact with the public – at a trade show, via phone, or in your workspace – they impact how people feel about your organization. You don't want customers to see a grumpy, overworked and resentful employee who clearly dislikes his or her job. You want them to see a waiter who enthusiastically recommends items from a menu he loves, a book store employee who knows his regulars by name, a car wash attendant who notices and tightens a loose hubcap. You want your customers to see brand stewards ... employees who are loyal to your organization and truly love what they do for a living.

What is a Brand Steward?

Some corporations have official brand stewards dedicated solely to hyping their brand. While this strategy works for many companies, brand stewards can be any employee who understands, promotes, and helps maintain a brand. An employee doesn't need "brand steward" on his or her business card to champion your company. He or she just needs knowledge, inspiration, and a feeling of value that comes with believing in your company, product, or service.

¹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79)*. www.bls.gov. Sept. 11, 2002. Cited October 2006.

Provide Education

Whether you're launching a new brand or hiring employees to sell your existing one, educate them. Good employees need to know about much more than their job duties. They ought to know your brand story and your company's goals, so they feel a part of something. If you own a sushi bar, teach your waiters about sushi. Help them with the Japanese pronunciations. Explain the difference between the three types of tuna on your sashimi menu. Get them excited about what they serve. If they feel knowledgeable, they'll be excited to share that knowledge with customers. In turn, customers will feel better connected and will share the joy these brand stewards exude.

Empower Your Staff

Empower your employees to make decisions and give them the freedom and resources they need to provide outstanding service. If employees are properly educated about what's important to the organization, they will be able to make good decisions that are consistent with your brand strategy.

For Bob Farrell, founder of Farrell's Ice Cream Parlor and Restaurant, this lesson was hit home by a customer's pickle complaint. It seems this customer was a regular of Farrell's, coming for lunch at least twice a week. He asked for and always received an extra pickle slice with his lunch. Then one day, a new waitress refused the customer his pickle. Even after conferring with the manager, the waitress offered to sell him a side of pickles for a \$1.25 or one pickle slice for a nickel. Thankfully, the customer wrote a letter, and Farrell was able to rectify the situation. But from then on, the pickle incident became his rallying cry for customer service. "Give 'em the pickle" has developed into a complete customer service training program with one main message: Keep customers happy. You do that by giving out pickles – providing special service or extras whenever possible.²

Farrell's waitress clearly didn't feel empowered to give away anything—even something as insignificant as a pickle. Let your staff know if it's okay to give out extras from time to time. Some companies even provide employees with a discretionary budget they can use on a patron's behalf. Sometimes employees may use the budget to satisfy a disgruntled customer. Other times, they can dip into it to provide that special extra experience. At a hotel, that might mean an employee runs out to buy the Wall Street Journal if they find out it is a guest's preferred morning reading. At a coffee shop, maybe it's simply the latitude to brew a certain flavor for a Monday morning regular.

² www.giveemthepickle.com. Cited October 2006..

It's not just money that creates a good brand experience. Employees become brand stewards by sharing their time too. That means you may want to emphasize that serving the customer is more important than accomplishing a certain task. In a retail store, for example, you may want staff to stop stocking shelves when a customer asks about a product location, so they can escort them to the proper aisle. Or, you may need to free up some staff time so employees have the opportunity to "breathe" and be solicitous. At one hotel, a maintenance staffer used his extra time to wash customer car windows in the parking lot.

Finally, ask your employees what they need to be better brand stewards. Maybe your receptionist needs a headset so he can call up names in the database quicker without cradling the handset between his ear and shoulder. Or maybe he needs an extra phone by the copy machine, so he can answer it faster while running administrative errands. Perhaps your grocery store clerk will recommend a service initiative to assist handicapped shoppers. And maybe your shipping department will suggest handwritten "packed by" thank you notes in every box. Let your staff have fun with it. Encourage their ongoing creativity and remind your employees to be brand stewards throughout the year.

Build Excitement

Some employees will go above and beyond for their employer no matter what, but the majority benefit from a little encouragement. When you see employees acting as brand stewards, show your appreciation. There are a number of ways to build stewardship among your employees and recognize their accomplishments:

- Build a "brand book" for employees. While many companies have "brand standards," these generally concentrate on logo usage and other details relevant to just a few employees. A brand book explains your brand to all employees. You can share details about the company's origin as well as your current brand vision. What does the name mean? Who founded the company? What does success mean to the owners: satisfied customers, environmentally-friendly manufacturing methods ...? Oftentimes employees feel making a buck is the company's only goal, but that is not always the case. If you're a veterinarian who cares more about animals than profits, tell – and show – your employees. Your assistants will rejoice in your dedication, and they'll be more likely to show customers how much they love pets.

- Create contests based on attitude, not sales. Many companies recognize employees who sell, sell, sell: hair stylists who push shampoo, electronics salespeople who push extended warranties, etc. Rarely do companies recognize brand stewards—the people who celebrate your brand every day. Watch for employees who provide great customer service or spend extra time sharing your brand story with interested customers. Those are the people that spark brand loyalty. Look for informal opportunities to recognize your staff, or implement measurable goals such as answering the phone within two rings or smiling and greeting customers within five seconds of their entry into the store.
- Give employees promotional products that showcase your brand's logo. Concentrate on products that employees will carry into the community, such as fleece jackets or beach towels. These products make employees feel valued while at the same time serve as mobile billboards for your company.

A genuine, personal “thank you” can mean a lot. Of course, a gift of some sort also motivates. Say thank you by offering a few hours of paid time off when you see a great brand steward in action. Or give gifts, such as branded golf sets, branded jackets, etc., to your leading brand stewards during a company meeting. They'll feel appreciated, and other employees will feel encouraged to join them in their actions.

Get Inspired by Brand Stewardship

The literature is full of examples of brand stewardship. Here are just a few:

WRR I – At Weichert Relocation Resources, Inc. (WRR I), brand stewardship is executed under the Raving Fans customer service model. The philosophy, developed by author and management trainer Ken Blanchard, is centered around the idea that customer satisfaction isn't good enough to succeed. Your customers expect to be satisfied. By going beyond expectations and creating Raving Fans, a company can distinguish itself from the competition.

Since 2003, WRR I has made the Raving Fan philosophy part of its core brand promise, institutionalizing it into nearly every aspect of WRR I's business, from its web site, to orientation of new associates, and to both individual and organizational performance requirements. It is now so infused into WRR I's culture that prospects and clients are told up front that they will be asked to measure interactions with the company's team

based on whether or not they have received Raving Fans service.

Employees that embody the customer service model are honored through the Raving Fans Spotlight recognition program. Another program, the Brighter Idea Award, honors employees who develop a creative solution that improves the company's business practices.

As a result of the new brand initiative, WRRRI has seen a major jump in client recognition of its exceptional customer service in the last two years—from 34 percent to nearly 70 percent—and other company benchmarks are also up.³

Southwest Airlines— The Southwest brand has been referenced in countless blogs and business books. This company has built its name on providing both low cost airfare and great customer service. In fact, in the early 1990s Southwest Airlines was the only US airline to turn both operating and net profits.⁴ Even in today's economic climate, the company remains consistently profitable due to its philosophy.

At Southwest, brand stewardship means daily exhibition of three company principles: a Warrior Spirit, a Servant's Heart, and a Fun-LUVing attitude. Southwest employees are encouraged to be passionate and emotional about their jobs. Story after story illustrates the impact of the Southwest model. In one, Southwest received an angry letter from a customer complaining that a gate agent had been rude to them during a weather delay. Management investigated and found the agent had a history of commendations on file, and it was the customer, in fact, who had been rude. They sent a reply inviting the customer to fly another airline, and copied the gate agent. Actions like that affirm the company philosophy that employees, not customers, come first at Southwest.⁵

In another story, a family lost their camcorder coming home from a trip to Disney World. It was returned because a Southwest employee took time to watch the footage for personal information that could be used to identify and track down the owner in Southwest's flight database.⁶

Southwest believes that when employees are taken care of, they will want to take care of the customer. If customers are happy, then profits

³ The Ken Blanchard Companies press release, September 29, 2006 & www.wrrri.com. Cited October 2006.

⁴ Ryanair Slow on Emotion, by Vincent Grimaldi, brandweek.com. Cited October 2006.

⁵ SWA's Thriving Culture of Service, Knowledge@W. P. Carey, cited October 2006.

⁶ Southwest Airlines Web site, cited October 2006.

will increase. Employees are encouraged to support each other, and to that end all employees (even top brass) participate in a “Days in the Field” program which requires employees to spend one day each quarter doing someone else’s job.

The Southwest brand stewardship program pays off in more than happy employees. It generates profits in an industry that as a whole hasn’t been profitable.⁷ Southwest has won numerous accolades including America’s Top Ten Most Admired Companies, Best Companies to Work For, Best Corporate Citizen, and Most Shareholder Friendly Company by various magazines and associations.

Montana State University – During a special “Breakfast of Champions,” Montana State University recognized staff members who effectively used the university’s new logo and key branding recommendations in publications or in the classroom. Four brand steward honorees received MSU “Brand Champion” emblazoned cereal boxes to display proudly in their offices.⁸

Information International Associates (IIa) – This Oak Ridge, Tenn., technology services firm created a “Value of the Month” campaign to recognize employees who embodied the 12 core values in the company’s philosophy. IIa’s president sends out a company-wide email at the beginning of each month introducing the month’s value and why it’s important to the business. Employees can then anonymously nominate colleagues they believe hold those values. Once a value is open, it remains open and candidates can be nominated throughout the rest of the year. If an employee is found to embody the value, he/she is given a button to affix to a small banner in their workspace. Small rewards are then given to employees who earn four, eight or all 12 of the buttons.⁹

Employees don’t want to feel like the only thing their employer values is the bottom line. In each of the examples above, the companies developed unique ways to make their employees feel valued at their jobs, increasing worker loyalty and helping to bolster the image of their business. Take a little extra time and effort to treat your employees the way you’d want to be treated and it’ll go a long way in retaining quality workers who’ll actively spread positive vibes about your brand.

⁷ SWA’s *Thriving Culture of Service*, Knowledge@W. P. Carey, cited October 2006.

⁸ Montana State University news release, March 08, 2006, cited October 2006.

⁹ PRSA eNewsletter, Spring 2006. Cited October 2006.