

**SERVICE
MANAGEMENT / HUMAN RESOURCES**

PAPER: THE STAR (BUSINESS)

DATE: 31 OCTOBER 2013

PAGE: 29

Managing customer expectations

Good service will keep patrons coming back for more

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THERE is customer service, and then there is the branded customer service experience.

The difference is vast when it comes to how customers interact and associate with a brand.

"It's not enough for customers to like a brand or service, they have to love it because then they will come back for more. They will also spread the word to the people they know, and your business will grow.

"Do not underestimate the power of social media because that's where word of mouth can either ruin or boost a company's reputation," said TMI Consultancy Malaysia chief executive officer George Aveling.

In this day and age, the service industry is fiercely competitive and if a company doesn't put extra effort in understanding its clients and providing great service, then it would lose out sooner than later.

Malaysian companies in the services-retail line could take heed of this advice as there are often times when the services are nothing more than transactional and impersonal.

"There needs to be a shift from

just handing over the change with little or no eye contact to a more human and interactive service. Just a simple smile, a please or thank you is a good start and can make a big difference but it is not common.

"The irony is that while a company's brand image portrays friendly and caring service during and after sales, that is not what customers experience. The brand image then becomes redundant," said Aveling, an Australian.

While heading the consultancy that helps its clients create effective customer service experiences, he has noticed the service performance of many companies fails to reinforce or represent the brand.

"When a brand advertises that its services are of a certain quality but customers do not experience that, it can tarnish the image and reputation of the company.

"As a business builds a brand, it must also carefully build its branded customer service to make customers happy and keep them coming back," said Aveling, who started TMI in Malaysia from a tiny photocopy room in early 2005 and has since grown it into a sought-after organisation.

Aveling recalled a particular food company that wanted to increase profits not by downsizing staff, but by building product

knowledge and improving the quality of its training in order to serve customers better.

"When most businesses see a decline in profits, they would usually cut employee numbers or their salaries.

"Instead, this company invested more in its people as it envisioned giving great service by training and providing incentives to its employees, which led to better service, more customers and an increase in profits," Aveling said.

To create a win-win situation of happy employees and happy customers, Aveling said that organisations need to make their employees have a sense of "belonging" and purposefulness.

"For example, a sales executive for an insurance company shouldn't just see his job as a mundane affair of documenting papers and filling up forms.

"This creates a strong sense of purpose and fulfilment for the sales executive and that is immediately transformed in his approach to work. This transformation will help the salesman build trust and rapport with his clients," Aveling explained.

Unfortunately, he feels that some big companies are too focused on making money and treat customer service as a front-line problem.

They do not realise that the impact of the customer experience is crucial to boost a company's image and, ultimately, led to an increase in sales in the long run.

For a micro, small to medium enterprise (SME), creating that branded customer service experience starts from the top where Aveling outlined several steps on how to achieve this.

According to him, the owner, director or leader needs to be the number one ambassador and flag-waver for good service.

"He has to walk the talk and treat his employees well by getting to know them and making them feel like they belong to the company," he said.

Aveling also cautioned leaders to be discerning of who they hire as interpersonal skills and attitudes were important.

He added that training programmes should also be put into place to allow employees to understand what great customer service was.

He said a key step was defining what good service meant for a company, as the service experience would be different in different situations.

TMI Consultancy Malaysia is the organiser of the Achieving World-Class Service in Malaysia

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— GEORGE AVELING



Conference that ends today at the Istana Hotel, Kuala Lumpur. The event presents international customer service gurus like consultant and author of *Branded Customer Service: The new Competitive Edge* Janelle Barlow and TMI Ireland managing director and international master trainer Conor O'Connell.

They are leading workshops such as "The five keys to building your branded customer experience organisation" and "How to create a personal service quality revolution in your organisation".

For more information on the event or consultancy services, call TMI Consultancy (Malaysia) at 03-6203 4410 or email events@tmimalaysia.com.my