

INTELLIGENCE

Just One Thing

By Eva Kaplan-Leiserson

In *City Slickers*, seasoned cowboy Jack Palance tells Billy Crystal that the secret to life is just one thing. What is it? That's what you have to figure out, Palance says.

In my and others' opinion, successful businesses have one thing in common: They treat their customers well. You may argue with me and say it's that

they have a great product or an innovative culture, or that they value learning, but I think that if you don't treat your customers well, none of the rest matters. And good—no, great—customer service can make a company stand out from its competitors, attracting new business and making customers loyal. In

fact, it can be a competitive advantage in a tough economy. This column has touched on customer service before  "Service Train-ing" ([News You Can Use, May 2002](#)) looking at employees. This time, managers are under the glass. Here are some recent experiences I've had. Truck rental company. After a

What one thing do successful businesses have in common? Read on.

miscommunication about where I'd be picking up a rental truck, I asked for a discount on mileage—since I hadn't been told I would be going so far out of my way. Instead of agreeing or suggesting another option that would still make me a happy customer, the manager berated me and threatened to cancel my reservation.

Local diner. I had brought a lunch to work but needed some ketchup. I went next door to the local family-owned and -operated diner, where I was a recognized regular customer. I asked if they had ketchup and even offered to pay for it. "We don't sell ketchup," I was told. "You have to buy something." On my way out, I noticed little plastic containers of ketchup already prepared in their refrigerator.

Guess which two businesses I'll never be a patron at again? I can assure you that the amount of money those two organizations lost from me is a lot more than the few dollars or cents they would've spent to make me happy.

It's not as if the people I dealt with in those companies didn't have the power to turn the situations around; they were in charge. What's worse is that at the rental company, it was a staff member who resolved the problem. In five minutes, she found a coupon for me and created a win-win solution. Why couldn't the manager have done that?

Car insurance company. In

this organization, customer service is obviously made a priority by higher-ups. Every interaction I've ever had with one of the company's representatives (they're the ones with the cute reptilian ads) has made me glad to be their customer. The agents are not only helpful, but also genuinely warm. They make it obvious that they enjoy their jobs, doing not just what's required but more. One stayed on the phone with me for about 15 minutes waiting to see if I got an urgent fax.

I am loyal to that company. If its rates go up, if it asks me to fill out a lot of paperwork, if it decides to no longer offer an 800 number, I'll still be tied to it because it makes sure that I'm happy, and that's the one thing.

The doctor's office.

Believe it or not, it can be pleasant to go to the doctor. One of my doctors is outgoing, friendly, and sincerely caring and has carefully hired staff who are the same. He knows having staff who give 125 percent is the secret to a successful practice. I've referred

three friends to his office.

When companies are struggling to survive, it seems as if the lesson is elementary (not to mention ancient): Do everything you can to make your customers happy. They're your lifeblood. What part of that don't people understand?

Next month, we'll look at how some companies are turning customer service into a competitive advantage.

Send press releases or short articles on news, trends, and best practices to **Intelligence**, T+D, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043. Email intelligence@astd.org.

Customer Service Basics

Here's what companies that don't understand "just one thing" do:

- Look at the customer as an adversary.
- Find solutions that work best for the company in the short-term.
- Don't admit to, apologize for, or work to fix errors.
- Berate the customer, making him or her feel dumb or valueless.
- Say "I'm just doing my job."

Companies that get "just one thing"

- look at the customer as a partner
- try to make solutions that work for both parties—taking the long-term view of keeping the customer
- admit to, apologize for, and bend to fix errors
- treat the customer as a valued, even most important, part of the business
- will do almost anything to make the customer happy.

Does your organization get it?

How to Prepare Your Company for the Economic Turnaround

We know it must be coming. Here's how to get ready.

1. Re-recruit your employees.
 2. Develop contingency plans for a slow recovery and for fast economic growth.
 3. Reaffirm your relationships with valued customers.
 4. Reaffirm your relationships with suppliers, making sure they can support fast growth.
 5. Engage in serious strategic workforce planning, including where talent will come from and what your succession plans are.
 6. Check your positioning in the employment market. How are you viewed?
 7. Engage employees in an honest critical review of operating systems and procedures.
 8. Check your corporate financing. Can you support lagging cash flow if you have a surge of orders?
 9. Concentrate on leadership and management development.
 10. Defend yourself against the vulnerability of an unstable workforce.
- Check out

<» www.workforcestability.org.

<» Source/ Roger Herman, workforce futurist.

SurveySays

Organizations with strong performance management systems are nearly 50 percent more likely to outperform their competitors, finds a new study by DDI (Development Dimensions International). Other findings from the study:

- Almost all organizations (91 percent) are using performance management systems, although 40 percent of those surveyed expect to make changes to their systems in the next two years.
- More than a third (34 percent) of organizations are using forced ranking.
- Forty percent of organizations are conducting reviews at least twice a year.
- Organizations are starting to use electronic systems, either online or software-based (20 percent using, 33 percent planning to use).
- Few are using 360 degree feedback—only 20 percent of companies surveyed.

<» For a copy of the survey, "Managing Performance," call DDI at 800.944.7782.

SmartLink

<» www.pz.harvard.edu

Project Zero, run by the Harvard Graduate School of Education, aims to "understand and enhance learning, thinking, and creativity... at the individual and institutional levels." Many research projects deal with K-12 learning, but there are some very cool projects examining adult learning as well. Check out the GoodWork, the Story Work, and the Understanding for Organizations projects on the research page.