

Start 2012 with Sincere Appreciation for Customers, Employees

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



January is a terrific month. It's a fresh new beginning. And with its relatively slower pace – a lull before the new year blasts into full force -- it's a time for reflection and planning.

Most importantly, it is a time for companies to say thank you to customers, vendors and employees for their support in the previous year.

Wait! You thought giving thanks was something reserved for Thanksgiving dinner, or even the greeting cards sent out during December?

Well, that's when we are "expected" to give thanks. But it's also when the gesture can get lost in an avalanche of customs.

January – and throughout the year, for that matter – is when an unexpected, sincere "thank you" can help an employee increase their motivation if they're a marginal performer, create loyalty among customers and encourage vendors to go the "extra mile" with a shipment or other service.

But the keys to "giving thanks" are the sincerity of the message, the timeliness in which it is conveyed and the content of the appreciation.

A recent study conducted by MarketTool for the Globoforce Workforce Mood Tracker revealed that 38 percent of employees are actively looking for a new job, and 52 percent are dissatisfied with the level of recognition they receive.

Employee dissatisfaction can spill over to customer dissatisfaction. Consider a recent Harvard Business Review article that focused on the fortunes of a nationwide fast food chain. The company had a low workforce turnover and relatively high employee satisfaction. This company also enjoyed 55 percent higher profits than similar fast food chains with high turnover rates.

Giving thanks – or in the case of the company profiled in the business review article, showing employees appreciation – should become a habit. It should be a company's culture. It should be meaningful.

Often companies "standardize" the process of appreciation into formal programs. There's no wonder that these programs often quickly fizzle out, or become meaningless rituals.

Standardized employee appreciation, as well as standardized customer appreciation programs, often lack spontaneity, sincerity and personal touches.

As an alternative, companies should develop a culture for sincere appreciation and ongoing expressions of that appreciation.

Here are some tips for thanking employees, customers and vendors:

- **Be sincere.** Mean what you say and say it with meaning.
- **Put it in writing.** Don't miss the opportunity to immediately say thanks, when thanks are merited. The longer you wait, the less impact your appreciation will have.
- **Send it the "old fashioned" way.** Don't email or text message a thank you. Send a handwritten note that is slipped into an envelope and delivered by the U.S. Postal Service. The "physical presence" reinforces sincerity.
- **Be specific.** Don't just write: "Thanks for the good work." Be specific about what work you found commendable. Write something like: "Thanks for handling the angry customer who came in Thursday to complain about the missing parts in his child's swing set. Your composure and creative problem-solving helped calm the man and kept the situation from escalating. The customer, who left satisfied, likely will remain our loyal customer as a result of your good work."
- **Be personal.** This requires you to know your employees, customers and vendors. If an employee's father has died, send a note of condolences. If a vendor's daughter has gotten married, congratulate him. If a customer has been mentioned favorably in the newspaper, send him a clipping of the story and a handwritten "Attaboy!" Showing that you really care about the lives of your employees, customers and vendors is appreciated.
- **Be appropriate.** If your intent is to reward someone, know what that person would appreciate. Perhaps a customer who has been named the head of a charity would appreciate a contribution to the charity. A vendor's representative might appreciate a letter specifying his good service, with a copy sent to his supervisor. An employee celebrating a wedding anniversary might enjoy a gift certificate to dine out at a local restaurant with their spouse.
- **Be unexpected.** Don't wait for an annual evaluation, or an employee appreciation day to give praise. Every day can be an employee, customer or vendor appreciation day. Give praise and rewards when it's deserved, not just because it's "scheduled."

Writing recently about the benefits of showing appreciation, business writer Jeff Haden likened employees to unique snowflakes. The same analogy can be applied to a company's customers and vendors.

"No employee responds the same to recognition. Most appreciate public praise, but some get uncomfortable when singled out, even for positive reasons," Haden wrote in a November article. "Your goal is to know your every employee so you can recognize each one in the manner that produces the greatest impact for that person."

Thanking an employee, customer or vendor requires a sincere effort to treat people as individuals and value their contribution to your success.

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