



Georganne & Rich — On The Road

BY RICH KIZER & GEORGANNE BENDER

The Store Culture Comes First

Webster's *New American Dictionary* defines the word culture as "the act of developing by education and training the customary beliefs and material traits of a social group." We define it as the ambiance and the atmosphere that surrounds and permeates your store and the people who work there. Your culture is what makes customers want to return, and what makes associates want to work there.

Your store culture is best compared to a rainstorm: it flows from the top down. Yes, the culture of a store, or any business for that matter, is set by the management. If you own or run your business, then the culture of that business sits squarely upon your shoulders.

We want you to forget about training your staff for a while, and concentrate on training yourself. You are the first word in your store's culture, and you are the last. You don't set the example; you are the example. The buck stops with you, kid. Your staff sees the things you accept that you shouldn't, and the things you let slide, that you shouldn't. And your customers pay the price. Without your good example to follow, there is not a training program out there that will create a world-class culture in your store. If you are not involved and moving the store forward, you are merely "there," stuck in neutral.

You expect your team to do incredible things – do you do them as well? If you ask your people to practice add-on selling,

then you need to be better than anyone else in the store at add-on selling. If you expect customers to be greeted within a certain period of time, are you the first one to say hello? If you said that the telephone has to be answered within five rings, then you can't ignore it just because your hands are full.

CULTURE OF DISTRUST

Knowing that the culture of a company flows from the top down, does it make sense for the ceo of a major airline to convince employees to take pay cuts, but still allow for big bonuses to be paid to upper management? Of course not.

But incidents like this are not isolated. The retail industry was once graced by another brilliant executive who issued the mandate that, regardless of your contribution to company growth, yearly raises would not exceed 2.5 percent. Imagine how the employees must have felt when "Mr. Not-to-exceed 2.5 percent" arrived the next day in a brand new Ferrari. You'd be pretty hard-pressed to come up with a better way to destroy a company culture or shatter employee morale.

What kind of corporate culture do you think existed in those examples? Certainly distrust and disbelief. And probably one of not feeling very appreciated; each a perfect ingredient for sabotaging customer relations.

We've spent quite a few weekends lately in stores trying to get our arms

around this culture thing. Many times we were disappointed when we found that store personnel didn't seem as happy as the employees featured in the company's commercials. But an equal number of times, we liked what we found enough to come back again. And when we had the same great experience each time we revisited a particular store, we knew that someone was paying close attention to the store's culture.

CONSISTENCY CULTURE

Creating and maintaining a strong culture is easier in an independent store because the owner is involved – it's his or her personal livelihood that's on the line. Chain stores are a little tougher because it's a greater distance from the corner office to the person ringing the cash register. Someone in the chain has to be constantly on guard, nurturing the culture and making sure that the customers' experiences are consistently good.

That "consistently good" is exactly what we found in a big sporting goods chain. We visited several of their stores with our focus group shoppers, on different days, visiting with different store employees, and found the "consistently good" ever present.

Champs Sports Stores knock us out. They have an incredible customer service culture. The day of the week didn't matter; the time of day didn't matter, either. If you were a Michael Jordan-caliber athlete,

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a confused couch potato buying a gift, or a 12-year-old kid asking 15,000 questions, it didn't matter. Every person we sent to Champs Sports came back with a similarly positive experience. Store associates greeted customers quickly, answered questions, suggested products, recommended additional items, and happily described what was on special on that particular day.

We asked a store manager, Ron Mickinak, to help us understand how Champs Sports manages to maintain such a consistently great store culture. The way Ron answered said it all. He spoke proudly about "his" store, "his" team, and "his" customers, and the associates standing nearby echoed his sentiments about the store and the company.

Just like any other company, the Champs Sports culture rains down from their headquarters, but it's carried through to customer level every day in

their stores. You can do this, too.

CREATIVITY & CULTURE

- Do your store associates refer to your store as their store?
- Are your associates as dedicated to your customers, and the store's success, as you are?
- How would you describe your store culture? How would they?
- When you leave for the day or for the week, what happens to your customers? Are they left in good hands?
- Does your staff operate out of fear, or do they deliver great customer service experiences because that's "just the way we do it around here."

There are lots of creative things you can do to strengthen your culture. When he was a hospital administrator, our friend Bob Blaizer would randomly show up in the middle of the night wheeling a cart

full of cookies and apples ... for the staff.

Bob knew that since most of his executives would be in bed fast asleep at 3 a.m., the folks on the night shift were the most likely to be forgotten. Bob's handshake, snacks and questions like "How can I help you?" and "What can I do to make your job easier or more efficient?" helped the hospital strengthen its culture and ultimately take better care of patients.

So here's the deal: As of right now, you are no longer the store owner or president or whatever you call yourself. Your new title is Chief Customer Advocate whose mantra is "Everyday, I will Evaluate, Execute, and DO ONE MORE THING."

When you set the stage to do more than the customer expects, you'll have the beginning of your new culture. Wearing this new hat, you'll clearly see your culture through your customers' eyes, and a healthy cultural growth will surely follow. ♦

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