



You Can't Afford to be Lukewarm

By Rich Kizer & Georganne Bender

Recently, a waitress scowled at Rich when he told her the coffee burned his mouth. She said, "Listen honey, nobody wants lukewarm coffee." Know what? She's right. Lukewarm doesn't cut it anywhere. Now, before you read anymore of this column we want you to get up and pour yourself a nice glass of lukewarm water. Take a sip. You're probably agreeing with our waitress right about now: lukewarm is bland. And it's disappointing. Especially when you're expecting some over-the-top, white-hot service ... er, water. You get the picture.

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White-hot customer service is a good thing, and when you consistently deliver it, customers form a higher level of expectations for your store. Once you achieve that level of superior service, you can never let your guard down, because that service level is now your norm. If a customer returns to your store and is disappointed for whatever reason, their experience becomes lukewarm. That single little slip will hurt your reputation more than if the customer came to the store expecting lukewarm service.

We decided to test this theory, so we held a focus group to discuss service levels in a few particular stores. After much discussion, we sent our focus group participants to a store with a reputation for superior customer service, and to a similar store with a not-so-great service reputation.

At store number one, the superior service store, our shoppers received "just okay" service.

At store number two, the one with the lukewarm service, they got just what they expected. Now, here is the problem. Or the opportunity. Each of our shoppers voiced disappointment with the first store because they didn't get the superior service they expected. They were, however, fully satisfied with their shopping experience in the second store. When we dug deeper, the thing that amazed us was that even though their service experience in the first store was not up to their expectations, it was still viewed as far better than the service in the second store. They felt good about their experience in the second store, but they were angry at the first store for letting them down. Go figure.

On that rare occasion that your store associates don't deliver knock out customer service, your customers feel let down. And every retailer knows you are only as good as a customer's last experience in your store. Once you have committed to move the service bar up a few notches above the competition, you cannot afford to let your guard down. Your service reputation, no matter how good it is, has no where else to go but up. It's hard, but that's reality.

Tiffany's service is not lukewarm; Starbuck's service is not lukewarm; Nordstrom's service isn't lukewarm, and neither is yours.

This year, vow to be better than ever. Write a customer service standard for all to follow, and put it in a place where no associate can miss it. Talk about it every day. Reward associates when they consistently carry your customer service torch. And throw out whatever's merely lukewarm ... for good. ■

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