

FAST LANE

Caring for customers

How Rich Ryan creates a positive experience for Voyager Jet Center's customers

By Meredyth McKenzie

Smart Business Pittsburgh/September 2007

As an active pilot, a former lieutenant in the U.S. Navy and now president of Voyager Jet Center, Rich Ryan has dedicated his life to serving people. Whether it's learning important information about the customer, going out of his way to be available or making sure the customer is safe during tough times, Ryan has put customers' needs first, which has helped him learn the good and bad of his company from its customers' perspective and become a better leader.

Ryan's dedication to serving customers has also helped the 50-employee charter airline company triple its revenue over the past five years to reach \$20 million in 2006.

Smart Business spoke with Ryan about how to think like your customers and serve them with a smile.

Q: How do you build relationships with customers, and how does it make you a better leader?

Do what you say, and say what you do to build relationships. If you make a promise to a customer, you have to fulfill that promise, even if it costs you money. Have a system, whether it's your BlackBerry or something else that jogs your memory when an item is due.

The advantage to building relationships is that you do get to know your customers better, and you also get an appreciation of what it's like to be an employee, what makes his or her job harder or easier.

It's important to stay focused and stay apprised of what the customer wants, what his or her needs are, because without the customer, you are nothing. Ask questions, be observant and anticipate the customer's needs. Anticipating what the client's needs are makes a big difference.

Always ask the customer, 'Is there anything else I can do for you?' It's kind of a catchall, but it often solicits some type of response. Communication is key.

Q: How do you teach customer service to employees?

I always ask the employee to think what it's like when they're the customer. We're all customers — you buy things, I buy things. So when you have that experience, whether it's buying a quart of milk or a \$100 shirt or suit, think about what you liked whenever you were the customer, whenever you were on the other end, and use that in your business.

Also, I've used the Disney experience with my employees. Most people have been to Disney, and it's been a positive experience for most. Disney works hard at the customer experience, and a Disneyesque company that does something similar to please its customers should be successful.

Measurement is one way to know if a person is exceeding or falling down in the area of customer service. If you get feedback from customers, whereby you have a service disappointment, then you give that feedback in a positive way to the employee, and hopefully, they will get better.

Q: How do you communicate your vision and goals to your employees?

Certainly we have formal meetings ... but I'm a big fan of walkabouts, so you meet one on one and try and understand what it's like in the trenches.

I ask my employees, 'Do you like your job?' The most important question I ask is, 'How can I be a better president to you?' Every review I give to employees ends with, 'What can I do to make your job easier? What can I do to make you a better employee? What don't you like that I do? What in me, do you not like? How can I be a better president?'

I'm fortunate that all of the senior managers are pretty smart, so I've surrounded myself with people, hopefully, that are smarter than me, so you don't have to hit them over the head to demonstrate the right leadership styles.

I'm a big believer in empowerment, and the only way to get managers to be responsible is to empower them. Give them responsibility for the budget. I give them gross profit and loss responsibilities. For example, how they divide up compensation is their decision and not mine.

Q: What inhibits a company from growing?

Sometimes growth isn't necessarily good, and the marketplace will tell you that very quickly.

Also, not anticipating the growth, so if you don't have your systems in place, your personnel in place, then you have individuals working 12 to 14 hours a day. They can do that in the short run, but in the long run, they'll fail. You end up disappointing the customer, and if you disappoint the customer, the marketplace will punish you.

HOW TO REACH: Voyager Jet Center, (412) 267-8000, (412) 469-0706 or www.voyagerjet.com

Smart Business Network | Copyright © 2008 All Rights Reserved.