

Is This Your Employees' Idea of Service?

When an employee flipped off a key customer, this CEO realized his company had a culture problem. Here's how he fixed it.



Many years ago, I received a call from an irate customer. "Your driver," she yelled, "dropped off our fruit and then gave me the finger!"

After calming her down and assuring her that we would correct the situation, I caught up with the delivery driver. "What happened?" I asked.

"Traffic was bad," he said, "and I was running 15 minutes behind. On top of that when I got to the office my normal contact wasn't there. This woman came out of nowhere and started yelling at me that I was late and to put the fruit in her conference room and not in the kitchen where I normally do. So I put the fruit on the table like I do every week and threw up my hands and left."

"That woman," I said, "was your normal contact's boss." I paused. "Why would you do something like that and not try to figure out how you could make the situation better and help her?"

The driver looked at me skeptically and said: "My dad taught me a long time ago that if someone disrespects you then you have to disrespect them right back."

It was at that moment that I realized not everyone had the same definition of customer service that I did.

How do you communicate your customer service values to people who may have never had a good service experience or models of positive ways to treat people? You need to go past just defining what you do and explain *why* you do it. And this explanation--your philosophy of business--needs to permeate the entire culture and find its way into all of your processes in order to be truly impactful.

The FruitGuys 5Rs©

I spent a good year after that delivery driver experience thinking about how to articulate the company's values to my staff and embed them in everything we do at our fruit delivery business. I realized that those values weren't just about treating our customers in a certain way, they were about the way we treated each other, our peers, our suppliers, our customers, and even the world at large. I needed a system, a philosophy, that allowed for self-reflection, so that when people came up against a challenge in their workday they had a tool to assess themselves as to how they did and how they could improve.

What came out of that year was the 5Rs©--a series of five questions that are deeply aligned with our ethics at The FruitGuys and drive our pursuit of greater meaning through decisions we make every day at work.

Be Respectful:

"Have we been respectful at all times?" This first question in our 5Rs© process is key. To us, respect comes from a place of equality rather than status or forced authority. This means that we should be respectful of people not because (like a police officer) they have power over us, but because they are human just like us.

Be Responsive:

"Have we been responsive to people's needs?" We talk about the difference between reacting (which tends to be emotional and often without thought) and responding. You need to observe, listen, and understand the problem and think about what solutions will produce positive outcomes in a timely manner.

Be Realistic:

"Have we been realistic about what we can and/or can't do?" This is one that is often overlooked but it's deeply important to admit when you can't do something. This is not to say that you can't strive or push to accomplish goals, but setting realistic expectations with clients, vendors, and other business partners is really the base from which success or failure will flow. We want to clearly assess potential roadblocks and be realistic about what it will take to be successful in our delivery of service.

Be Responsible:

"Have we all taken personal responsibility for outcomes?" Running a business that is growing is like running a lengthening relay race in which you keep adding runners. The points at which you pass the baton will become greater and greater and you need to make sure that everyone in the organization takes personal responsibility for not just his or her leg of the race, but the handoff, the approach, and the departure of that baton. If everyone in the chain does this--takes the kind of responsibility that touches their work and the work of others--then you have a much stronger system in which everyone constantly communicates.

Be Remembered Positively:

"Will our actions allow us to be remembered positively?" If, in your analysis of how you solved or didn't solve a problem, the first four Rs don't give you insight, then this last one acts as a catch-all. If you can't walk away from an interaction, scenario, project, or experience and feel that you will be remembered positively, then something went wrong and you need to figure out what that was. This last R truly drives more than just our philosophy of customer service at The FruitGuys, it drives our mission and desire to do good and create positive environments. It reinforces what I think is an inherent cultural value at our company--being humanists as business people who care about positive outcomes and healthy lives.



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