



PROFIT MATTERS

HOW DO YOUR NUMBERS LINE UP? | BY CHRIS "CHUBBY" FREDERICK

If you don't care about customers, do you think your employees will?

Many years ago, Dale Carnegie wrote a book that became famous by helping us really care about other people. The book taught us the basics to really listening and what not to say if you wanted to win friends. Shop owners, in an effort to make real money, must focus as much on the customer as the car today. As a matter of fact, many times the customer is more broken than the car.

To many of us, this may seem silly, because we are around broken cars every day of our lives so it is not a big deal. Our customers, however, may need more empathy than we think they need in order to like us. When your customers really like you, it is easier for them to swallow large repair bills. They focus much less on your pricing and are more willing to forgive if mistakes happen.

As coaches to thousands of shop owners, we see that not enough effort is being spent on building the relationship with your customers. Although there are probably 5 percent of customers who are darn near impossible to make happy, the rest are certainly possible to win over. Shops with 95 percent happy customers typically are more profitable, always loaded with appointments, are known as the best and

the owners have more free time because there are fewer fires to put out. My head coach, Brian Canning, told me a great story I am sure you are familiar with that explains why many shops don't have 95 percent happy customers.

Brian shared with me that in writing "Alice in Wonderland," Lewis Carroll said, "if you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there." Putting it another way, if you don't care where you end up, you will eventually arrive.

The point I would try to make is that if you are not leading and setting goals for yourself and your business in terms of customer satisfaction and if you are not setting expectations for your people as to how your customers are treated, then it doesn't matter how good your location is nor how talented your staff may be.

You have no destination in mind and are leaving the entire journey to chance. Like Alice, you are very likely to experience adventures along the way, though unlike her, the ending is likely to be unhappy and could follow you well into your future.

I would love to tell you that in writing this I was able to call upon the writings of Lewis Carroll out of learned recollection, but the truth is that this very wise quote came out of an e-mail critique from my father in which he expressed his reliable disagreement with an article I had written.

My dad, a retired school principal of 84, looks upon the automotive industry with suspicion. My seven brothers and sisters are economists, teachers and scientists, and several have PhDs. Occasionally when my dad and I discuss industry trends or issues, I feel he is looking at me as though I were diseased, perhaps crazy and certainly not entirely respectable.

Though my father is decidedly unaware of the hostile business environment and very tough market conditions most shop owners are forced to operate in, his suspicions and negative opinion of the industry are commonplace and in large part due to a generally well-intentioned industry that has been hurt by a few crooks, our unwillingness to take on these shady operators and our seeming embarrassment at charg-

QUESTION OF THE MONTH

QUESTION:

What is the biggest mistake service advisors make building relationships with customers?

They spend too much time talking about themselves and not the customer's interests.

Do you have a question for Chubby? E-mail him at cfrederick@autotraining.net.

ing a fair and reasonable price for the important services we provide.

Doctors, lawyers, plumbers and landscapers certainly do not apologize when they hand you a bill. Similarly, today's cars are incredibly complex and require highly specialized training and equipment before you would even think about diagnosing the most basic problem. My advice would be to forget the embarrassment, devise a winning game plan and make those customers and customer service your greatest priorities.

When opening a business, we have the opportunity to decide what kind of shop it will be. It can be the best quality, the cheapest or a specialty shop catering to specific makes or types of vehicles. We can stress convenience, price or great customer service and who we are and what we are is something we need to decide before we open our doors, before that first transaction is rung up.

Survey Your Customers

CSIs, those customer satisfaction surveys that many of us are doing, are a critical tool in our measuring how well we are meeting our customer's expectations. There are great benefits in our just sending out these surveys. It shows our customers that we actually care and want to hear their honest opinions.

With the positive comments we see, we can reaffirm all the good things we are doing, while any negative comments provide us with an opportunity to identify problems within our business and offer a reasonable chance to redeem a customer who might have had an experience that was something less than our best effort.

The typical shop owner I talk to is a technician who decided he or she would like to be a business owner. I have nothing but praise for an individual who would follow his or her dream, though if given the opportunity I would caution them to dig a little deeper and truly understand the challenge and burden they are taking on. How much will it cost? Does he have a business model or as I often see, does he even know what a business model is? How is he at dealing with people? Does he understand what customer service is and what his customers are looking for? What does profitable mean?

These are all questions that, under the best of circumstances, we ought to have

the answers to before we even think about going into business. The reality is that the vast majority of the owners I talk to "just do it." And to their credit, a good portion of them do it well and enjoy success. I would praise and compliment their entrepreneurial spirit, but would encourage all of them to seek advice in developing a plan and putting policies and procedures in place that will support that plan. You're going to have a very difficult time getting there if you don't know where there is.

In an age where knowledge seems to be no more difficult than a Google search, the automotive industry appears to suffer the very negative perceptions of the buying public. Fighting these perceptions needn't be more complicated than actually showing your care and concern for your customers and demanding quality from your staff. Excellence is something your customers are happy to pay for again and again. Restaurants, retail stores and that other shop down the street haven't figured that out. Give them reasons to feel like family and your customers will always come home.

Change Their Beliefs

Do something extraordinary and unexpected. Treat your customers like you care. We all have heard these suggestions, but they are hard to deliver if you don't really care. It can happen to all of us at times; difficult employees, customers, landlords and vendors can sour the day.

Ask yourself this: If you don't really care, do you think your employees will? Your employees believe what you believe unless prior leadership has influenced them. The only way to getting more free time is having your employees believe your customers need to be treated in an extraordinary fashion. Otherwise, you will



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have to be there all the time to demand quality behavior on their part.

First, we must change their beliefs before we can change their behavior. If you can't change their beliefs, find someone who can or someone more willing to serve. Otherwise, it will never improve for you.

So, maybe the problem is you. If so, it may be time for a vacation, a long weekend or a new mentor to help you back to really caring about your customers. You may decide it is time to let go of those who don't believe in really caring for your customers so you can hire someone who does, to allow you some free time to work on your business and not in it every day.

Whatever you decide, taking action is the only real power generated from Customer Satisfaction Surveys, so why don't you take some right now! If you need a good CSI Survey, simply e-mail us and we will send it to you. [✉](mailto:cfrederick@autotraining.net)

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