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By John Tschohl

Note to Editor: Feel free to use all of parts of this news release. John Tschohl also is available for personal interviews. You can contact him at the phone number or e-mail address above.

"When every employee in an organization understands that taking care of a customer is the most important thing they can do, you have a service culture that will drive your business."

At one time or another, most of us have had contact with employees who clearly do not enjoy dealing with people. They don't make eye contact, they don't smile, they aren't helpful, and they send the message that they wish you would just go away. That's bad for you, as a customer, and even worse for the company that hires them.

So says John Tschohl, founder and president of the Service Quality Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and author of several books on customer service, including *Loyal For Life*. Surprisingly, he adds, few companies understand the importance of customer service in giving them a competitive edge.

"When you do whatever is necessary to ensure the customer has a good experience with you and your company, you will have customers who are loyal for life and wouldn't dream of doing business elsewhere," Tschohl says. "I'm not talking about a media campaign that lauds your service; I'm talking about providing customers with great service day in and day out. If there is no consistency, there is no service."

Tschohl, who has developed and delivered training programs that have helped companies around the world create service cultures, adds that creating that culture isn't easy and it doesn't come without a price tag, but it will reap great rewards. Tschohl recommends the following six steps to create a service culture that will set you apart from your competitors.

Develop and drive a customer service strategy. "This is a powerful strategy that will allow you to differentiate yourself in the marketplace," Tschohl says. "In order to be effective, it requires a long-term commitment

by top management. I believe that the reason most organizations don't have a service culture is that their management doesn't understand the strategic value of customer service. They have only to look at Southwest Airlines, Dell, Amazon, The Home Depot, General Electric, Commerce Bank, and Wong in Peru to comprehend how critical service is in creating a successful organization. You can develop a customer service strategy right under the noses of your competitors and have at least a 10-year lead time, because, unlike pricing, they won't copy your efforts."

Eliminate policies and procedures that impede a service culture. "Make it easy for customers to do business with you," Tschohl says. "I'll give you an example. Southwest Airlines does not charge its customers when they make a change in their reservation. Other airlines, however, force customers to pay substantial change fees or even purchase new tickets. In 2005, while the U.S. airline industry lost more than \$10 billion, Southwest earned \$548 million."

Hire the right people, and treat them well. "Companies that are truly focused on customer service take great care in who they hire," Tschohl says. "Look for people who are intelligent, personable, and who view service as a critical element in any task they perform. Once you've hired those people, train them, treat them well, and recognize and reward their efforts. Driving a service culture means you need to value your employees as well as your customers."

Empower everyone in the organization. "Employees must have the authority to make a decision on the spot to bend or break the rules in order to serve the customer," Tschohl says. "Without empowerment, you will never have a service culture. Too often, however, empowerment falls by the wayside because employees are afraid they'll be reprimanded or fired if they make a mistake in serving customers, and management is afraid that their authority will be undermined if employees are empowered to make decisions. What they don't realize is that empowered employees free up managers to focus on other aspects of the business."

Train the entire workforce every four to six months. "You can go to any school in the world and not find a course on customer service," Tschohl says. "If you want high-performing, customer-driven employees, you must provide the training they need to do the job. And, to be effective, that training must be provided on a continuous basis, using new materials every four to six months. No company would run the same TV commercial over and over for ten years because it wouldn't be effective. The same is true with training."

Measure the results. "What really counts are hard numbers," Tschohl

says. "When you create a service culture, you will see its impact on your organization's revenues, profits, and market share. When you breed a service culture in your organization, it will become a way of life, and the bottom-line impact will blow you away."

John Tschohl is an international service strategist and speaker. Described by Time and Entrepreneur magazines as a customer service guru, he has written several books on customer service, including Loyal for Life; e-Service; Ca\$hing In: Make More Money, Get a Promotion, Love Your Job; Achieving Excellence Through Customer Service; and The Customer is Boss. John also has developed more than 26 customer-service training programs that have been distributed and presented throughout the world. His bi-monthly strategic newsletter is available online at no charge

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