

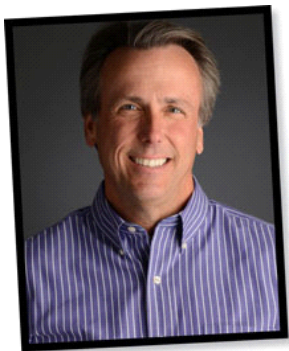
GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Not Customer Service—Hospitality

Chris Beytes



CHRIS BEYTES

I just attended The Garden Center Show in Milwaukee, held August 8-10, where I heard an interesting story from keynote speaker Nicole Leinbach, founder of RetailMinded.com and author of the book “Retail 101: A Guide to Managing and Marketing Your Retail Business.”

Nicole told the story of a friend of hers who owned a toy store in Chicago. The friend called Nicole in a panic. Apparently, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie (“Brangelina”) were coming the next day to shop.

“I don’t know what do to” the friend said.

“That’s amazing,” Nicole replied. “You’re going to make so much money!”

“I have nobody to work.”

“You have a team of like 20 people. Nobody wants to work?”

“No, you don’t get it,” said the friend. “I would never have any of them help them.”

The audience laughed knowingly and Nicole said, “Exactly.”

If you’ve been reading this column for a while, you’ll know I’m passionate about customer service. I’ve long felt it’s the one easiest (and hardest) place you can make your business stand out from the crowd. Easiest because so few businesses excel at it; hardest because it requires that your staff (and you) are at your absolute best at the hardest times possible: when face-to-face with a customer. And it requires having staff who are willing to learn and practice the fine art of service.

Nicole didn’t ask, but had she queried the audience, “How many of you think your business has excellent customer service?” I suspect most every hand in the room would go up. And yet, according to a survey she cited, 70% of consumers feel that businesses treat customer service as an afterthought.

Think about your own experience as a customer. When was the last time you had an excellent customer service experience? It’s rare, right? Good experiences are memorable. Unfortunately, so are bad ones—you know, the ones that lead to nasty Yelp reviews.

Anyway, back to Brangelina. If they came to your business, you and your staff would roll out the red carpet, fawning on them, star-struck, saying, “Yes, ma’am” and “Thank you, sir” and practically curtsying, if you knew how.

Which makes me wonder about Nicole's friend: She felt her staff wasn't good enough at customer service to wait on Brad and Angelina and their six kids, but they're good enough for regular folk like you and me? Leaves one feeling a bit insulted, eh?

Now, from this point forward, I'm changing the term from "customer service" to "hospitality." That's because the master of the art today is Chick-fil-A and that's what they call it. Need proof of their mastery? Their average restaurant does nearly twice the sales volume of the average McDonalds—and they're closed Sundays! They're all about creating "raving fans" who visit more often, happily pay full price and tell others about their experience.

One way they do that is by creating frictionless transactions (for instance, a new store concept features four drive-through lanes). Chick-fil-A has what they call the "Core 4" that they teach all employees: Make eye contact, smile, speak enthusiastically, stay connected.

Simple, right?

"Those four things, done well, over time, make you want to remark about it, make you want to come back and visit," said Chick-fil-A Senior VP of Operations Shane Benson in a video. "I'd love to say that this is a complicated process that literally no one else can duplicate, but unfortunately, that would not be true."

Core 4 sounds to me like an excellent starting point for improving the hospitality of any business. If you think yours could use a boost, just for fun, plan an educational field trip. Treat your staff to lunch at their choice of fast-food joints one day and at Chick-fil-A another, and ask them to review and critique the service at each. How did they feel during and after each visit, and why? Then bring up the Core 4 and challenge them to put it to work at your business.

And you do it, too, of course, setting the good example, as always. **GT**