

IS IT ALL TALK?

Communicating to your customers and colleagues in the right way could make all the difference to your business...



"Have a nice day!" It's a phrase that, more than likely, will ruin rather than improve your afternoon. Well, maybe not ruin, but you're almost guaranteed to spend a couple of minutes grumbling about the increasing Americanisation of the country.

So, why bother making attempts to improve communication? After all, we're already rejecting the best efforts of some multinational companies. Well, the difference is that for SMEs, the smaller scale of the business means that it's possible to instil good communication practices from the start. That means not having to resort to hastily introduced strategies borrowed from the Americans later on.

Whether your customers are members of the shopping public or businesspeople who have specifically chosen your product or service, there is a lot to be gained in training your employees. Research shows that poor customer care is the biggest single reason for a customer to change supplier, so every penny spent should be considered as an investment.

It need not be expensive. Training courses in customer service do exist, but there are basic steps that can be taken. For example, consider Pizza Hut – not an SME by any means, but it has taken the best of the American attitude to customer service and adapted it to the UK market. The company has spent large amounts working out the best way to treat visitors to their restaurants, but the conclusions that were reached were fairly uncomplicated.

Fiona McAndrew is Training Manager at Pizza Hut UK. She says: "The transformation that can take place between our starting point of a new, untrained, young employee and the end result of someone who is proficient with customers can be remarkable. But it simply comes down to being shown how best to respond to customers.

"The key to our training is just explaining that it only takes simple measures to make customers happy. All businesses could benefit from making sure that customers are greeted as soon as they walk in and treated like

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SPEAKING WITHOUT WORDS

Emphasis is also placed on using body language to show the customer that they have the waiter's full attention. Take a look around your business, do you think people still look enthusiastic about their position? Do they have energy or has the love of what they do been replaced by a desire either to get away or just work for the pay cheque?

"We concentrate on the physical interaction between our staff and the customer," says Fiona. "For example we emphasise the need to smile and be attentive to what the customer is saying. Maintaining this standard shows how effective the training is – along with a fun atmosphere between the staff in the restaurant that is designed to keep everyone's spirits up."

This is an issue of leadership. Every company is different, but if you can motivate your staff to see reasons for enjoying their work, their naturally positive attitude will rub off on the people they deal with. It does make a difference. Research by the Strategic Planning Institute discovered that businesses offering good service grew twice as fast as those with poor service.

So, your staff are reaching out to customers, you're looking good and you're leading from the front. One final, vital area where the heads of SMEs need to consider their communication skills is in the world of networking. We're not just talking about your ability to hand out cards at

Chamber of Commerce functions, networking is about building relationships with the people you meet.

Effective networking can make a world of difference to the future of a business. Judith Perle is a Director of Management Advantage (www.manadvan.com), based in North West London. She and her team offer seminars on how to make the most from meeting someone new.

She says: "It's important to know people on a personal level or all you have is a list of phone numbers. That's just a database. Talk to people on the phone, send them an email but where possible try and meet them in person as it's being one-to-one that makes the big difference.

"But remember, it's not just about what you can get from the person you're talking to. Unless you consider what you can offer them too, it's not going to lead anywhere."

Evidence suggests that networking to the full can have a huge impact. After all, if you were going to choose between two companies you'd pick the one where you'd met the MD, wouldn't you? So would they. More than that, being able to call on a circle of people who know you well enough to offer a bit of free advice when the need arises is invaluable.

So it's clear that to reach the top you, and your company, need to be able to communicate on many levels. However, to borrow a famous quotation from the American industrialist Henry Kaiser, as important as communication is, it is perhaps worth remembering this final point: "When your work speaks for itself, don't interrupt!"

The changes needed may only be minor, but the key to discovering them is more communication. Perhaps a bit of team spirit is needed. That's easily fostered: encourage people to say how they're doing and offer their opinions to you about the company. Tell people what the company has on the horizon. If people feel involved they will be more inclined to go that bit further when dealing with customers.

FOLLOW THE LEADER

Of course, the best way is to lead from the front. Show people how you would like to see it done and, if they respect you, they will probably try and emulate your methods. More than anybody else in the company, it's vital that the person at the top is a strong communicator. If employees do not believe in the vision of the boss they are unlikely to put in the extra mile that makes a business excel.

Instilling this belief is an important skill. Much of it is attitude and appearance. If you walk tall, even when things are difficult, others will follow. If you look smart, even under stress, people will listen to what you have to say. In Richard Branson's autobiography (see page 12 to win a copy) he writes that the only time his bank manager worried was when he had made the effort to arrive for a meeting in a suit.

For the rest of us, the reverse is true – smart should be the rule rather than the exception. If we dress well it adds weight to our words. This is a view echoed by Savile Row tailor Steven Hitchcock. He should know. As the son of a Savile Row tailor himself and the youngest independent tailor to work in that area, he understands the importance of a good suit.

"You need to look professional if you want people to treat you professionally," he says. "Men should own a plain and unfussy 13oz Worsted wool suit in blue or grey, to suit most occasions. It is just as important for women to dress well, and a two-piece suit with trousers or skirt completes the confident look."

WIN



Steven Hitchcock: Master tailor on Savile Row, London.

If you want your clothes to be as sharp as your words, a trip to Savile Row tailor Steven Hitchcock could make all the difference. To get you off to a flying start, he's offering two readers the chance to win a man's bespoke shirt worth £135. If you can get to his outfitters in New Burlington Street, Savile Row, you can be hand measured for the shirt before making your choice between a range of styles, collars, cuffs and pearl buttons. If you prefer not to visit London you can make your selections using Steven's website www.designashirt.co.uk. To enter, write your name, title and company address on a postcard and send it to Alliance & Leicester Commercial Bank, Bridle Road, Bootle, Merseyside, GIR 0AA.