

A Few Good People Wanted

Remember the ad the Marine Corps used: “Wanted, A Few Good Men”? Well, there is no doubt that this same requirement fits every employer out there. Let’s face it, it is really tough to find and retain good people. So, what do you do to be the employer that everyone would like to work for?

In the car wash business our requirements as to number of employees and skill level do vary. If we are a self-serve operator, the requirement is for that “jack of all trades” who not only is mechanical but hones and personable. I know you’re thinking “Are you nuts? They don’t exist.” Au contraire, mon ami, but they do and they are probably living as close to your site as a good wedge shot. Every time I opened a new site I would always have a retired individual stop by and express interest. Nine times out of ten they fill the bill perfectly. I’d guarantee them 20 hours a week, and they would volunteer another 10 or more. They loved being involved and needed.

If you’re a multi-profit site operator, then the need for more than one person is a requirement of the business. As an example, if you are a full-service tunnel car washer, the rule of thumb says you will need one person for every 2.5 cars you process per hour. In other words if your target is 50 cars an hour, you are looking at 20 people. If you are a tunnel operator running an exterior wash, your staff could be as few as two. The question here is in knowing your staffing requirements and not getting caught either short or long.

So now we are either deciding on, or have already chosen, the type of business. We know the commitment we have made and are ready to build our team, regardless of size. Retaining employees is just like retaining customers. We can get them to our door once, but retaining them in the face of all the obstacles out there is no easy task. So, what are the challenges? They are really no different from building a strong customer base. Think of implementing the same strategies and tools that you would

use in customer retention or to build a successful business. Retaining top notch employees is no different.

Start with a plan. All stakeholders in a business enterprise need to know where they are going and how to get there. The business plan is not communicated only to your shareholders, vendors, and employees but to your customers as well. As a customer, this first comes across in the area of quality results. This is accomplished by doing your job efficiently and without stress. When your customers perceive that they are receiving value, they are also validating that your team is operating efficiently, that the team is well trained and disciplined. The harmony of your team is expressed by the attitude they demonstrate to your customers. It may sound trite, but a happy employee based makes for happy customers.

Your business plan should include a “Vision Statement” and a “Customer Value Statement,” as well as a description of your business operating principles. An operating principle is the moral code within which you function. An example would be “to run our business honestly at the highest level of integrity”. Once your operating principles are communicated to your employees, there should be no mistaking your expectations, as well as the consequences for not performing within those bounds.

Not long ago in another article I brought up the book *The Experience Economy*. If you remember the theme of this book it was that we are entering an era where the more profitable and successful businesses will be those that provide a meaningful positive “experience” for their customers. A big part of that experience is derived from your employees. So, if you want to separate your organization from those around you, remember that all stakeholders need to participate in a positive consistent environment.

So what are your employees looking for? In the car wash industry the majority of our employees are minimum wage. Many are inexperienced and often we may be their first employment experience. This doesn’t mean that these people are the bottom of the barrel; it means that they are just like you and me when we first began our long careers. What they want is pretty straightforward: an opportunity to prove to you, as well as to

themselves, that they can be successful. I know there is a lot of talk about wage and benefits. There is no doubt that they do play an important role, but most important is for your employees to know that they are valued. In companies where morale is poor and turnover is high, I believe that the number one cause is poor communication or no communication.

Recently one of the largest (perhaps *the* largest) fast food purveyors in the world ran a number of powerful ads. They didn't talk about their "French fries" or any other item on the consumer menu. They talked about people. If you haven't seen the ad let me tell you that it featured a large number of very successful people who all started out serving hamburgers and sodas. The point is that those individuals all started as entry level employees. The experience they gained was taken with them as they grew, matured and moved on to positions as high as our U.S. Senate. What was the motivation? Was it the inspiration derived from being part of a dynamic, disciplined business model that treated all stakeholders with respect? You can bet on it!

Good luck, and remember that the impression you make on your team can inspire some awesome results.

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