

Take a tip from a waiter

Brian Trout

Believe it or not, a waiter might be able to give *you* a good tip.

Try this. The next time you eat at a restaurant, pay special attention to the wait staff. Which waitresses are doing a great job? Which busboys are the best? And finally, what do they have in common?

Chances are you will see that what makes those service people great is their ability to read the customer. They monitor their customers' satisfaction without hovering. They are aware of — and anticipate — diners' needs without being intrusive. They can pick up the body language that signals when a customer wants the check, needs a refill or is just plain unhappy.

What does all this have to do with *your* business? Everything.

Good customer service should be the signature dish of any retail establishment. The challenge, of course, is finding and hiring people who possess this ability, because it's something that is difficult to teach.

Think outside the candy box

So how do you sniff out these truffles? By supplementing your traditional hiring approach — the one where you interview applicants and call their references — with a more hands-on tactic.

Perhaps you ask some of your top performers to meet candidates so you get a variety of opinions. Maybe you set up a small role-playing scenario that has applicants face a dissatisfied customer. Or you ask potential employees to show you how they would tackle a specific task.

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For example, one way to screen applicants might be to hand them each a box of candy bars and ask them to sell the candy to some of your employees who are posing as customers. Then watch to see what happens. Do the applicants irritate people with their approach? Are they able to engage the “customers” and look them in the eye?



Brian Trout recommends serving up excellence on a silver platter.

The point isn't to see how many candy bars they can sell. Not at all. You want to see how they sell *themselves*. Are they embarrassed? Uneasy? Shy? Confident? Adaptable? Outgoing?

This demonstration probably won't be easy for potential employees, but it can give you a glimpse into a skill set that is impossible to reveal in other ways. It provides a way to see if applicants have the potential and desire to provide the kind of customer service you expect.

Food for thought

Which brings me to my next point: Model the kind of behavior you seek. Once you do find five-star employees, it's essential that the people in charge — whether that's you or a general manager — read from the same menu.

Employees look to leadership to set the tone. If managers are rude to the customers, chances are everyone else in the store will be, too. But, if senior personnel dish out great customer

service, employees can see it with their own eyes and learn from it.

Plus, they will know that your expectations are high — for you and everyone around you.

One final tip: The next time you are out to eat — or anywhere for that matter — and spot a top performer, leave a 20 percent tip and think about offering that person a job. After all, you've gotten a good taste of the service he or she is able to provide.

Brian Trout possesses 13 years of convenience-store operations experience in company-owned, company-operated and franchise/dealer channels. He has held a variety of positions, including site manager, sales operations manager, regional account executive, company account executive, director of operations/operations manager and operations excellence manager. He is now a dealer operations manager for the Mid-West Fuels Value Chain.

**How do you make sure you're giving customers five-star service?
Share your tips at TMGS@bp.com.**

- Credit-card payment programs with competitive fees and full rewards

Four FAC members agreed to assess the McLanes proposal versus their current programs with McLanes and Core-Mark. They will present their findings at the next FAC meeting.

BP tests new ATM antitheft equipment

Safeguarding customer information is top of mind not only for consumers, but business owners as well.

As part of addressing this concern, BP's technology coordinator presented new security equipment to the FAC group. The equipment, an enhanced PIC security card reader, is designed to prevent information from being stolen from ATM cards.

BP is testing the new card reader at a few locations in the Los Angeles market. The new equipment is slated for rollout west of Rockies in the second quarter of 2008, after the initial trial wraps up.

Insurance broker presents health-care programs

Health-care costs are rising for employers everywhere, and BP franchisees are no exception.

A representative from Emyrean Benefit Solutions outlined several health-care insurance options for franchisees and their employees. Emyrean, which serves as a broker for multiple insurance underwriters, listed several benefits to using its health programs: affordable health care, highly rated insurance carriers, and products for full- and part-time employees.

The FAC assigned a council member to review Emyrean's offerings and make recommendations to the rest of the franchisees.

New debit-card programs under review

Service fees have been on the rise for debit-card transactions. To combat this trend, a representative from BP Fuels explained that the company is evaluating new debit-card programs. These programs should reduce the costs of debit transactions and service fees.

FAC members will be advised once the evaluation is complete.

To find out more about the Franchise Advisory Council and its activities, contact Franchise Operations Director Derek Tomita at derek.tomita@bp.com.