

Are customer and employee engagement one and the same?

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Customers or employees? Which one should you engage first or most? Neither and both. They become one and the same if smart, strategic internal communication is the tool you use to drive loyalty, engage employees and build a customer service culture. And here's why...

We understand the dilemma. You have one budget and two “engagements” to spend it on – your customers or your employees. Both are critical to your business. Both want and need to feel important. So what do you do? Split the budget and with it your focus? Or choose one to the detriment of the other? There is a third option. A change of mind. Yours. If you start to think of your employees as customers and spend your time and budget making sure you communicate, internally, just how important they are to your brand, you can really crack the customer culture code.

Cultivating a customer culture, not just a mindset



Many companies say they are “customer obsessed” and will proudly list the many programmes that evidence their customer service mindset. But when you ask them if they see their employees as customers, they give you an incredulous look, like you just cut their social media budget in half. Adopting a customer mindset is only the first step to creating a customer service culture that recognises and treats all employees, vendors, shareholders as customers. Yes, customers. And yes, by customer we mean anyone who talks about your brand and has the potential to buy your products or influence another person’s purchase of your brand. So yes, employees are

indeed customers in the broadest (and possibly truest) sense.

A customer service culture grows what it knows

A customer service culture knows that if someone has a consistent and positive brand experience this will increase their loyalty to your brand and turn them into willing ambassadors.

Why? Because people like to think of themselves as influencers who are “in the know” about the latest products and best brands. They share that information willingly in the hope it makes them look and feel good among their friends and peers. This is gold because, as David Armano, Global Strategy Director at Edelman, puts it, “information shared by a person has more credibility than something that comes from a brand.”

A strong customer service culture also knows that if you treat your employees like gold, they will not only shine but pass that value onto the people they interact with, be it their colleagues or your customers. It’s a no-brainer really. A frontline employee who feels good about the company and feels connected is going to impact the customer experience in a positive way.

So maybe customer engagement and employee engagement are actually engaged to each other? Armano seems to think so. “Companies that are very focused on the customer experience are not surprisingly also focused on the employee experience. There’s a direct correlation.”

Of course you could spend a lot more time engaging with your “external customers” but then, as Armano points out, “There’s less risk and greater reward when you’re making sure accurate information gets to your employees.”

The new workforce demands engagement not just employment

Forget for a minute that engaged, motivated employees tend to offer up more ideas, are less likely to call in sick, are more productive, and more likely to recommend your company as a good company to work for.



There's another home truth we need to face – baby boomers are on the way out and Millennials are just the start of a new generational workforce that demands more than perks and a paycheck to keep them engaged and satisfied. In fact, a recent survey of LinkedIn members (aka the Millennial playpen), found that 73% of the 26,000 people surveyed globally wanted a career where they felt they were making a difference.

Seen another way, disengaged employees are costly. According to a 2015 AON employee engagement report, one disengaged employee can cost a company as much as \$10,000 in lost revenue. Every year. Are you multiplying that by your growing workforce yet?

And here's another number to crunch. According to global analytics firm, Gallup's, Employee Engagement Index, over two thirds of all employees are disengaged or even actively disengaged (which is the workplace equivalent of a benchwarmer). That's costly news, especially if those two thirds happen to be customer facing. So now we have a numbers game that is eating at profits every working day. So what to do? How do we engage employees and make them feel like they are making, as Millennials put it, a "meaningful contribution"? The answers lie in looking internally, not externally.

If employee engagement is the question, Internal Communication is the answer

Consulting company, AON Hewitt recently carried out a study to uncover the 10 most important engagement drivers at work. Do you know what came in second with frontline staff, just behind good job opportunities? Communication. More specifically they wanted communication that would help them engage with their company's value proposition so that they could better internalise it and relay it to their customers in a more personal and engaging way. Yes, even frontline employees understand that better engagement begets better engagement. And Internal Communication is key to unlocking this. Here are a just few ways you can improve your game...

Ten ways internal communications can be used to engage employees:

1. Cut through the information clutter to free up time for meaningful engagement with colleagues and customers.
2. Train people in the language of sharing.
3. Encourage and enable sharing, input and dialogue across the company.
4. Relay and relate company objectives, goals and values to create employee buy-in.
5. Use online and mobile tools to reduce the need for meetings.
6. Showcase managers who lead by example.
7. Establish regular processes that aid efficiency.
8. Conduct regular and focused employee surveys to keep in touch with employee sentiment.
9. Make it easy and rewarding for employees to engage with and contribute to your company culture.
10. Embrace new ways to stay connected to remote, contract and deskless workers.

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