

Principled Service

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What has integrity got to do with customer service? It is an absolute necessity if leaders want to build their brand on a solid foundation.

Merely meeting customer expectations is not enough. People crave extraordinary experiences. If a company can deliver those, then they will create a new breed of advocates who are fiercely loyal and willing to purchase more products, even at a premium cost.

Advocates are invaluable because they actively promote and protect the company's brand. Research published by the Peppers and Rogers Group, a Denver-based consulting firm, indicate "the customer now controls over 50% of the brand message." We love to share our experiences, whether good or bad, and social media has been a powerful conduit.

Ultimately, advocates require trustworthiness. This goes beyond the basics, such as simply delivering on promises. It requires professional competence and, most importantly, a genuine concern for the customer's well-being.

When trust is betrayed, people become passionate about warning others. I was tempted to do that when things went awry at OK Ethics' annual awards program. Volunteers worked hard to organize the event, even hiring a special speaker for the nearly 400 guests. Too bad that the hotel's equipment failures disrupted the presentations and spoiled the experience for everyone.

To make matters worse, management was slow to apologize or offer a discount. Trust was destroyed by their inability to capably deliver services, followed by inadequate amends that showed a lack of empathy.

Contrasting that experience were the positive ones that OK Ethics has had with the Doubletree by Hilton in Tulsa. Their senior catering manager, Donna Andrest, literally went the extra mile by traveling to Oklahoma City to see how our preferred banquet provider (Petroleum Club) handles the local chapter's monthly luncheons. She even brought cookies!

My favorite example involves the General Manager of Sulphur's Artesian Hotel, Bryce Chitwood. Through a series of well-intentioned but misguided efforts, my late husband presented me with a gift certificate that did not specify an amount. I had no idea what to do. Chitwood handled the problem with a sincere desire to do the right thing. He provided more services than what the certificate was really worth, but his kindness enhanced the hotel's reputation and he earned a loyal advocate. After all, who doesn't enjoy being treated with grace, honesty and genuine hospitality?

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