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Chick-fil-A's Recipe for Customer Service

Not all fast food chains are fast companies. Chick-fil-A is an exception.

by Chuck Salter

All too often, top-notch fast-food service is an oxymoron, like having high tea at a NASCAR race. Speed is the top priority, a strategy that produces high volume, but leads to notoriously inconsistent, impersonal, and uninspired interaction with customers.

Chick-fil-A is different. Its staff focuses on being swift and attentive. For the past two years, the Atlanta-based chain was named "best drive-through in America" by the quick-service restaurant trade journal QSR.

President and chief operating officer Dan Cathy infuses everyone from franchise owner-operators to teenagers earning \$9 an hour with his passion for service and his conviction in its intrinsic worth -- to the individual as well as the company.

As we noted in our Customers First Award to the company, customer-centered leadership is the cornerstone of Chick-fil-A's service. Here are some of the other ideas that keep its customers coming back:

Mind your manners

At the end of each transaction at Chick-fil-A, you don't hear, "You're welcome," "Glad to help," or "Come back and see us." You hear these two words: "My pleasure." It's distinctive and classy, the sort of service you expect

at a much fancier and expensive establishment, like Ritz Carlton, which is where Cathy says his father got the idea.

Cathy loves to add service touches that people don't expect from a fast-food restaurant. His latest is folding the last sheet of toilet paper into a triangular point. He believes it conveys a sense of cleanliness and meticulousness that customers appreciate. When he or one of the operators comes up with a new twist, he promptly sends out a voicemail message to owner-operators at the nearly 1,200 locations.

Nobody sells your business like your customers

When the chain opens a new restaurant, it goes out of its way to find Chick-fil-A fans in the area. Regulars at other locations and people who stop by the construction site eager about the opening get invited to a special dinner the night before the official opening. After serving the crowd a free dinner, Cathy gives them 10 coupons for free meals and deputizes these "raving fans" to act as Chick-fil-A ambassadors. They promise to spread the word and hand out each coupon to a different person, someone unfamiliar with the restaurant.

If you want to race, build yourself a race car

Chick-fil-A employees strive to complete orders within 90 seconds in the drive-through window and 60 seconds at the counter. The technology behind the counter helps them get the job done; a timer on the computer monitor flashes yellow if an order is cutting it close, red if it runs over. Owners also create a sense of competitiveness among the crews. In Louisville, Kentucky, owner Chris Flanagan erected a big red "drive-through wall of fame" to motivate employees. It lists the current record (110 cars an hour) and the names of the employees who achieved it. Whenever a team sets a new mark, he rewards each member with \$50.

Know what matters to customers

Every year Chick-fil-A spends more than a \$1 million evaluating its service. In addition to traditional focus groups, the company conducts a quarterly phone survey with customers from each restaurant (the incentive: a free sandwich). The 20 or so questions focus on four factors that most affect loyalty according to Chick-fil-A research: taste, speed, attentiveness and courteousness, and cleanliness. Each location receives a two-page report detailing how it's doing in each area and how it compares to the chain's top performers. In other words, what's working and what needs improving.

You're can't be too thorough about hiring

The process of selecting new franchisees is so painstaking and lengthy (up to a year) that it's easier getting into the CIA, Cathy likes to joke. Applicants work in a restaurant and endure countless interviews; often, their spouses and parents get interviewed as well. Cathy wants to be sure that new operators share Chick-fil-A's corporate values. All the restaurants, for instance, are closed on Sunday, as a day of rest and worship. Operators don't necessarily have to be Christian, Cathy says, but they do have to exhibit humility, passion for service, compassion, and genuineness.

The main idea of "servant leadership," says Cathy, is that leaders serve the staff. Managers treat their employees how they want those employees, in turn, to treat customers. "If we have to keep telling people what to do, it means we're not modeling the behavior ourselves," says Cathy. "If we're living it every day, we don't

need to talk about it."

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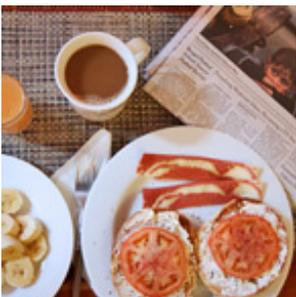
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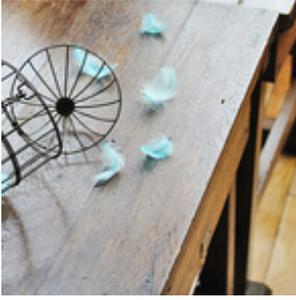
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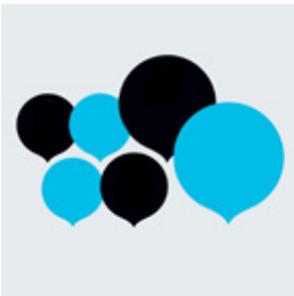
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