

Deliver a World-Class Customer Experience

By Lauren Simonds May 15, 2013

Take a page out of Disney's employee training playbook to see how creative management can lead to fully engaged employees dedicated to pleasing customers.

It stands to reason that anyone who owns a business can learn a lot from studying The Walt Disney Company. The venerable business has been in existence since 1923, and it's grown up to become both a worldwide media-and-entertainment giant and a global household name. Along with Mickey and his friends, the House of Mouse encompasses ABC, Marvel Entertainment, Pixar, Lucasfilm and ESPN.

But as Dennis McCafferty points out in an article at CIO Insight, it takes more than impressive acquisitions to spur and sustain growth. It takes, among other things, a culture that's dedicated to excellence. In a recent book entitled "Disney U: How Disney University Develops the World's Most Engaged, Loyal, and Customer-Centric Employees" (McGraw-Hill), author Doug Lipp takes a deep dive into Disney's workplace culture.

A global training enterprise that began in 1955, Disney U is the place where the company's leaders have defined and instilled a workplace culture that incorporates attention to detail and company values along with a healthy dose of fun. The result is an engaged workforce dedicated to providing the best possible customer experience. And Lipp provides an insider's perspective; he helped develop the international version of the program.

Below you'll find a dozen management tips and best practices taught at Disney U. How many can you adapt to your small business to help your employees give your customers the best possible experience?

1. As Walt Disney said, "Laughter is no enemy to learning." Disney U takes learning seriously by incorporating humor and entertainment into its training sessions.
2. Simplified lesson plans include actionable items. Plus, the curriculum receives organization-wide support.
3. Tools to develop engaged employees include strong corporate values and incentives, like gifts and cash bonuses, in equal measure.
4. Increased understanding builds appreciation. A buddy system pairs Disney workers with different jobs, and they shadow each other for a period of time to learn what each of them does within the company.
5. Disney characters and other customer-facing employees are taught that they simply can't have a bad day – when they're with customers. Private venting away from the public eye is OK.
6. Attention to even the smallest detail matters. So much so that the company deems one out-of-order ride at a huge park unacceptable.
7. No one position is so important that the person holding it can't pick up the trash. Disney promotes a culture that emphasizes that no one is above doing any job.
8. Disney teaches its employees that customers are guests, not "attendance numbers" or "per capita units." By focusing on people and not numbers, the company doesn't lose sight of the human element.
9. Imagine if your entire workforce smoothly handled customer complaints? Disney U teaches workers how to turn an unhappy customer into a happy, loyal customer.
10. Disney cultivates a creative culture and empowers employees to discover what Lipp calls a "Mickey Mouse" breakthrough – an idea that sets the bar a bit higher.
11. Employees have the flexibility to move beyond the confines of cookie-cutter rules and regulations. Business units can customize policies to take regional style and culture into account.
12. The company encourages volunteerism, both for the good it does within the larger community and for the leadership and teambuilding opportunities it provides employees.

