

Briefly Noted

by
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Service Stars

Judgments about customer service are made in seconds. Interactions with service providers are often brief, but the impressions lasting.

My interaction with Tiffany was one of those brief encounters. It likely took no more than 60 seconds – just the time necessary to scan two items, take my money, make change and ask if I wanted a plastic bag (I didn't!).

I met her while I was in Vancouver recently and visited the Chapters bookstore near our hotel. I selected two books, including a slim volume, *How to Talk to Moms*, written by child author Alec Greven when he was nine years old. I thought both our grandchildren and their mother would enjoy and benefit from reading it.

As I approached the service desk, Tiffany smiled and offered to serve me.

"What a cute title," she observed. "Who's it for?"

"My daughter – and her children," I replied.

"That reminds me that I need to mail a gift to my mother for Mother's Day."

"Do you know what you are going to buy her?"

"Oh, I've already bought her something she will like. I just have to mail it."

Handing me my change, she asked, "Would you like me to put that in a bag?"

"No, thank you."

I may have not have had a plastic bag when I left, but what I did leave with was a good feeling about Tiffany. She didn't have to tell me to "Have a nice day." This brief encounter was enough to have improved my day, which had already been pretty good to begin with.



Quote of the Month

"A leader is a dealer in hope"
– Napoleon Bonaparte

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Nelson's Point of View:

RPI forgot the most important reason to recognize staff

Last fall, just as it was becoming evident that we had entered a recession, Recognition Professionals International e-mailed its members a list of seven reasons to recognize employees.

RPI (formerly known as the National Association for Employee Recognition) is a non-profit association that "[exists] to study, develop and promote systems that enhance employee engagement and performance through employee recognition." (www.recognition.org)

While all the reasons listed by RPI were valid, I think that one – the most important reason of all to recognize – was missing:

It is the right thing to do!

This is what our parents taught us. They emphasized to us as children the importance of expressing appreciation. They taught us to say "please" and "thank you" when we received a gift from a relative, or when a playmate shared a bag of candies with us. If we forgot, our mother or father would prompt us by asking, "What do you say?"

Our parents taught us to express appreciation when we received gifts or kindnesses, without any expectation of getting something in return. They didn't justify saying "thank you" by telling us that if we did we would improve the chances our uncle would remember our next birthday, or that next time a friend would share her treat.

Certainly, saying "thank you" was not without its benefits: other gifts that were given and treats were shared. This may have happened because we remembered to say "thank you," but perhaps it would have happened even if we hadn't. We'll never know for sure.

To express appreciation with an expectation of a benefit is like giving a tip at the beginning of the meal and expecting it will improve service. A tip, like genuine recognition, is an expression of appreciation of good service received.

Saying "thank you" in the workplace has benefits as well, including all the reasons on the RPI list. Knowing that all these positive outcomes can come from regularly expressing appreciation is important when building a business case for recognition.

Yet, while it is important to recognize staff for all the reasons identified by RPI, the benefits will be even greater when what motivates us to recognize comes from a deeper source – an underlying belief that saying "thank you" is important just because it is the right thing to do. Period!

Top Seven Reasons to Recognize Employees NOW!

1. Reduce turnover
2. Increase profitability
3. Increase productivity
4. Retain top performers
5. Create a positive work environment
6. Elevate customer service, sales and satisfaction
7. Attract a better recruiting pool

Source: *Recognition Professionals International*, October 29, 2008

This teacher never won the recognition lottery

During a conversation several months ago, a teacher recalled that when she transferred to a new school, her colleagues told her how lucky she was to be going there. This school was known for its staff recognition program.

The teacher described arriving at the school to discover that the recognition program consisted of a monthly draw from all staff members to identify the employee of the month. Other teachers were asked to write something positive about this individual. These comments were collected and presented to the employee of the month.

The next month, another name was drawn from those who had never been so honoured previously. Several years later, when the teacher moved to another school, she claimed the distinction of being the only teacher to have never become the employee of the month.

Not surprisingly, her assessment of the school's staff recognition efforts is not as positive as those of her former colleagues, who had never experienced recognition by lottery.

High-Value, Low-Cost Staff Recognition

- When a project that has required a complete team effort ends successfully it's time for a team celebration:
 - Hold a pizza party
 - Host a BBQ lunch
 - Organize a Mexican fiesta, complete with tacos, salsa music and a piñata
 - Take everyone to a movie matinee. Don't forget the popcorn.
- On June 16, encourage everyone to celebrate Peer Recognition Day (third Tuesday of the month).
- When someone completes a project on time as a result of having putting in extra time or working late, show your appreciation by telling her to sleep in (and come in late), leave early (especially on the day before a long weekend), or take an extended lunch break.
- Express your appreciation — and show how well you know the staff member — by presenting him with a signed and framed photograph of his favourite athlete or entertainer, which he can display in his work space or at home.
- When you see someone recognize a co-worker, let her know you saw and appreciate what she did. Recognize the recognizers!
- July is National Ice Cream Month. Celebrate by serving frozen treats to team members at their desks or workstations. There's also a National Ice Cream Day—Sunday, July 19.
- Do you trust and have confidence in staff members? If you do, show it by granting them authority and autonomy to complete projects.

A reader shares another example of family-friendly recognition

In response to an article in the last issue, a reader e-mailed us with an example of family-friendly recognition in action that he gave us permission to share.

Darcy Marshall, vice principal of H.J. Cody High School in Sylvan Lake, AB, writes that the principal of his child's school makes "good news" phone calls. The principal takes her cell phone with her when she visits classrooms. While still in a classroom, she calls a child's parents to describe something the student has accomplished. When she is finished, she concludes the conversation by saying, "This is what your child's classmates think of her." As the principal holds up the phone, the whole class screams and yells.

"It is a great feeling!" writes Darcy, who is obviously a parent who received one of the principal's calls.

Darcy says the principal has done something similar for at least one staff member. "One day, she did it for one of her teachers whose parents live in Newfoundland. The mother started to cry right on the phone."

I welcome opportunities to share stories of recognition in action. Please send me your stories of recognition that went well for me to share with readers in future issues of Briefly Noted.

Nine tips for writing and asking high-quality interview questions

While British broadcaster David Frost is likely best known today because of the recent film *Frost/Nixon* that chronicles his 1977 interviews with disgraced former president Richard Nixon, he has had a long and distinguished career as a journalist and interviewer. When he once wrote that, "You can tell the quality of the question by the quality of the response," Frost may have been thinking of the questions asked by reporters or talk show hosts. But his words are just as true for managers who are preparing to conduct interviews when they have a vacancy to fill.

The purpose of any interview is to gather high-quality information. The way to do this is to ask high-quality questions that will produce the information you need to make your hiring decision.

Here are nine simple tips on how to improve the quality of your questions, the quality of the responses and, in the end, the quality of the people you hire:

- 1. Verb Tense** – Asking questions in the past tense is key to successful Behaviour Description Interviews. Find out how candidates responded to a situation in the past and you can predict how they will likely respond to a similar situation in the future, which may take place in your workplace. If you ask them how they would deal with a situation, what you will get is their best guess at what they will do. Questions asked in the present tense ("How do you do this?") don't fare much better. Candidates tend to slip into the future tense when answering. Only when you pose the question – and the candidate answers – in the past tense do you get evidence of past behaviour on which to base your hiring decisions.
- 2. Be more general than specific** – Questions can be too specific. "Describe a time when a customer was upset because his order arrived two days late," sounds like a good question but may be difficult for some people to answer. While the job applicant may have dealt with customer complaints in the past, the reasons the customers were upset may have had nothing to do with late deliveries.
- 3. But not too general** – There is also a risk in asking questions that lack focus. The candidates can wander too far afield with their answers. Asking prospective teachers to "describe how you plan," can result in vastly different responses. One candidate may focus on unit planning, another on daily planning and a third on year plans. Such diverse answers make it difficult for the interviewer to compare responses.
- 4. One question at a time** – Sometimes questions can require candidates to describe how they

handled a variety of things. "Tell us about your approach to time management. How do you encourage others to manage their time?" Questions asked in this fashion confuse candidates. Is this a question about personal time management practices or training others? One candidate may answer one question fully and ignore the other. Another will answer both, but superficially. Again, it will be difficult to compare the responses of the different candidates.

- 5. The power of one** – By asking the candidate to focus on one situation or individual, you will hear a much more specific response, resulting in a clearer picture of the candidate's past behaviour. "Describe a time when you dealt with an upset customer" is a much better question than, "Describe how you dealt with upset customers." If you feel the candidate's response is incomplete, you can always ask for another example.
- 6. KISS principle** – Keep it short and simple. Every organization has its own jargon, well understood within the organization, but not by outsiders – and sometimes not even by those working within the same industry. If you must use jargon during the interview, include a brief explanation when you introduce the term. "Tell us how you have worked with support staff, such as school secretaries or educational assistants."
- 7. Paint a true picture** – Don't lie. Avoid overstating either the positives or negatives associated with your organization. Remember that part of your role as an interviewer is to sell the organizations to prospective employees. When a question begins with "Frequently there are conflicts with our co-workers," the candidate's first thought is *not* likely to be: "Boy, this sounds like a place I want to be!"
- 8. Travel straight ahead** – Questions can take abrupt turns if we aren't careful. This can be confusing for candidates who don't have the same access to the interview roadmap as the interviewer. "Things can get pretty hectic around here. Describe how you plan for a typical day in your current job." What is being asked for here? How the candidate copes in a busy workplace or how this person sets priorities? Be clear about the type of information you are seeking.
- 9. Stay job focused** – The best predictor of future on-the-job performance is previous on-the-job behaviour. Ask questions in a way that reminds the candidate that you are looking for work-related examples. Ask about being part of a work team, not having been part of a team – which could have been work-related, but could just as easily have been a sports team.