

THE POWER OF ENGAGEMENT

Keeping your team engaged and involved is essential in meeting your financial goals.



By Stan Pohmer

Engagement ... the act or process of creating emotional involvement or commitment. What a powerful word, one that we use all the time in many different situations. There's a couple's engagement, making an emotional commitment and agreement to one another. And in the military sense, an engagement is a fight or battle between armed forces. In many different past articles in *Lawn & Garden Retailer*, other authors and I have discussed the critical importance of engaging with the customer to create a bond through positive experiences. But rarely do we have conversations about engaging with our teams, the ones who we call upon to engage the consumer. Unless we get our teams engaged, motivated and inspired, they will never be as successful with the consumer as they possibly could be.

Consider this quote from a *Fast Company* blog: "A recent analysis of 15 million frontline employees found that one-third of respondents were hopeless, aimless and dispirited. When asked whether their employers were meeting their people management, employee development and workplace climate needs, 13% gave a resounding 'NO!' And even the 34% who said they'd had one of these needs met were quick to clarify that it was due to a bare-minimum effort from their organization."

Yikes! How can we expect our teams to engage with the customer enthusiastically and confidently if they don't feel we've engaged with them to the point where they feel they've been effectively motivated and treated with respect?

Remember, these frontline team members are the public face of your brand; as a leader, isn't it in your best interests to ensure that your frontline team is motivated and inspired to engage with your customers at the highest levels possible?

The positive engagement of your team members with the customer provides immediate results, creates the opportunity for long-term trust and relationships leading to loyalty, and is a real competitive advantage.

Connecting With Your Team

When we've talked about engaging with the customer, we suggested that, to be successful, one must first listen to them to ascertain their needs, wants and desires, to discover the problems they are looking for you to help them solve, and to find the confidence to be successful, to be inspired. Only then can you suggest solutions and make recommendations. This then becomes the foundation for an experiential relationship that builds trust and, longer term, loyalty.

This type of relationship goes beyond the transactional and creates a connection with the customer on an emotional level.

To engage with employees is to become involved, to understand and deal with their needs and motivators, and to understand their unique working styles and personalities — and then adjusting management styles to accommodate their needs, strengthening interpersonal relationships, building trust, and increasing productivity.

While each team member is an individual with unique needs, motivators, skill sets and behaviors, we've learned that today's employees all want some things in common. Here are some of the highlights:

- They want to understand your vision and mission, and their role or purpose in the big-picture strategy.
- They want to be involved, seeing how their efforts benefit the organization.
- They desire transparency, knowing the performance numbers — the good, the bad and the ugly — so they can better understand their roles and the whys of the business.
- They want the flexibility to achieve and maintain work/life balance.
- They want the tools and resources needed to perform and succeed.
- Once they have the direction and job parameters, they want some autonomy to perform, using their personal skill sets and personalities. It may not be exactly the same way you'd perform, but if the goal is achieved, does that really matter?

Echo Flame



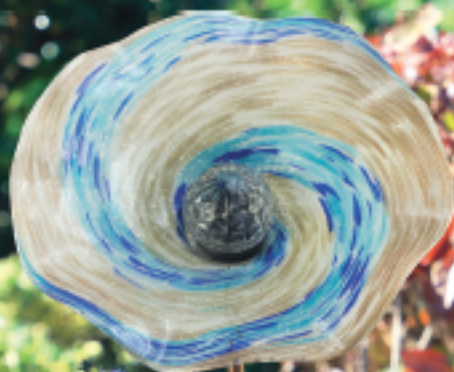
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- They want responsibility with accountability.
- They want you to start your relationship with them based on mutual trust. Neither you nor your employee should have to wait for trust to be earned.
- They want you to hear their voices and opinions.
- They want to be treated as people, as individuals, and with respect.
- They want to feel appreciated and recognized for their accomplishments and efforts.
- They want to look to you to be confident, enthusiastic, excited, inspired, and motivated. These traits are contagious and can be instilled in your team.
- They want to be challenged, receive positive reinforcement, and have the opportunities to gain experience, new skills and skill sets to develop their potential.

Knowing these common employee needs up front allows you to anticipate some of them and proactively create and develop policies and programs that address them. Ensure that these programs and policies are clearly communicated, especially to new employees, so they can readily recognize that you've anticipated many of their needs and motivators.

Rules for Engagement

So how do you engage with your teams and individual employees to develop mutually satisfying relationships? First and foremost, listen to them! Ask probing questions and ask for clarification.

As leaders, we're all prone to be the ones doing all the talking, but engagement is a two-way street. Listening to the feedback doesn't mean that you have to agree with or implement everything your employee voices, but be empathetic and respectful to what they say. Be ready to explain what you can or can't address with their requests and needs, or take their input under advisement (and make sure you get back to them with a decision).

Here are some suggestions on when to have these "engage with" conversations with your team members. The first opportunity is upon hiring them in a complete review of policies and procedures, with ample time to hear any concerns and respond to any questions. Next, schedule

formal status meetings on a regular timetable — weekly, semi-weekly or monthly — based on your business's time requirements. These can be as short as 10 minutes or up to an hour, providing ample time to give feedback, hear concerns or talk about new projects and personal development. Then, look for informal opportunities to touch base, using a few minutes before or after opening/closing, or grabbing a cup of coffee during a brief moment of down time.

The key is to keep the lines of communication open to further develop those emotional connections.

I've found that transparency is one of the key areas to focus on. When I led the hort/lawn and garden division for a national big box retailer, senior managers were provided a weekly sales and contribution report (SAC) that provided weekly, monthly, YTD against plan comparatives for all of the significant data points, by department. We were on a retail accounting system, so these data points included sales, purchase markup (PMU), markdowns by type (promotional, price reductions, etc.), shrink, GM and contribution (GM less freight, distribution and marketing expenses).

Most leaders kept these reports under wraps, sharing info on a need-to-know basis with their teams. However, I published the report to my headquarters and field teams weekly, so the entire team could monitor our performance.

My feeling was that the team had more impact on the results than I did, so it was to our mutual benefit if they could see how their individual efforts impacted the entire team's performance. Doing this gave them all "skin in the game" and provided incentive to maintain personal involvement and focus on achieving the planned results. And the strategy worked; in 13 years, the team achieved a Golden SAC (meeting/exceeding every financial element versus plan) an unprecedented seven times!

I've said this before: your frontline team, the face of your brand, has more impact on the customer experience than your leadership team does. Keeping them involved and happy, developing their skills, and inspiring and motivating them are essential to meeting your financial goals. It's all about engaging with... 🌱

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