

Services Marketing and the Branded Service Employee

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Services Marketing and the Branded Service Employee

Introduction

For centuries, marketers have attempted to discover and create the most effective methods of incorporating a company's brand into its products. This brand incorporation has traditionally been accomplished through brightly colored labels, sleek packaging, and high tech graphic design. Many companies have been so successful at branding that their products names have become synonymous with their products. For example, few people request a cotton-tipped swab; most people ask for a Q-Tip[®]. And instead of filling their children's glasses with soft drink concentrate, most parents quench their children's thirst with Kool Aid[®]. The prominence of these brands is a result of years of the effective marketing of high quality products. Such effective marketing must surely also exist in the services industry. Surely strong branding is not limited only to tangible products.

However, it seems many corporations in the service industry see effective marketing as little more than maintaining positive public relations. Granted, the dynamic nature of a living, breathing human being poses branding challenges never faced by those whose primary media is static, predictable, controllable, and nonliving, but this does not mean that service firms are excused from brand implementation in all areas, including the primary product they sell: their services. To ignore the branding of the very item that makes contact with the end user in product marketing would be unthinkable. This same mindset should apply in the services industry, but before it may be accomplished, such branding must be clearly defined, its traits and ideals identified. Implementation steps of

branding service employees must be broken down and evaluated, and consideration must be given to what the branding of service employees is not.

Definitions

The word *branded* is the most complex of the words in the term, “branded service employee.” Images come to mind of individuals being prodded through a narrow gate, down a fenced aisle that ends with a painful hot iron in the rear, which heals to proclaim the goodness of the company he works for. While this would indeed improve the nation’s job turnover rate, it would probably not effectively present a company’s brand.

Definitions of the word “brand” vary widely, but most are founded on the idea of symbolic differentiation. Coca-Cola’s red can and white ribbon are icons that even those with a youthful or cursory knowledge of soft drinks could recognize. Intel’s memorable four-tone chime has been effectively associated with computers that work and that work well, as they play every time a computer with “Intel Inside” successfully boots up. These audio and visual “tags” are understood almost universally; that is, within a company’s target market. Such is the goal of a successful brand.

In the appellation “branded service employee,” the word *service* is simply to be contrasted with that of “product.” Within the constructs of the branded service employee, there is no final tangible product that may be placed in a bag and carted home; therefore, the *service* aspect is the toughest to pin down and manipulate. It cannot be encased in plastic, and still pictures in a magazine advertisement cannot capture the essence of a service the way they can a product, although sometimes the portrayal of the *results* of the service may be compelling. Service is gooey and amorphous. It is dynamic and

constantly moving and changing. Hence, finding a single symbolic representation of a service is a challenge to the manager and the marketing professional.

The *employee* is then the one and only tangible aspect of the “branded service employee” concept. The employee may also be the most troublesome aspect, as employees exhibit a trait no product on the shelf ever will: human nature. The agent/principal problem never arises with physical inventory, but will do so, sometimes frequently, in the individual workers a company may be attempting to brand. Molding employees into the type of workers whose actions are consistent, identifiable, and distinguishable is a challenge many middle managers have chosen to ignore; however, they do so to the detriment of their brand. After all, what other than the employees would set a bank, for example, apart from other banks? Which part of the fast food business sets a company apart more than its employees? It is not the hamburger (an item which may also be purchased at the restaurant next door, and next door to that, and so on) that provides differentiation among similar restaurants. It is not the low price (that remains within 50 cents of its nearest competitor’s, and increases just as the competitor’s prices increase in an uncanny, collusive manner) that causes an individual to choose one fast food restaurant over another. Each fast food restaurant is as convenient as the next, thus convenience is also of little consideration. Nay, it is a service firm’s *employees* that guide a consumer’s experience, and therefore, it is this group upon which significant brand focus must be placed, especially within the services industry.

Traits and Examples of the Branded Service Employee

In order to isolate and define the traits of an effectively branded service firm, one must examine a number of unique service providers. A few examples of such unique

service providers to be observed in this paper include Cold Stone Creamery, HomeBanc Mortgage, Marilyn Ihloff Salons, Quiktrip Convenience Stores, Southwest Airlines, and Wawa Convenience Stores. From these companies, one may recognize several shared traits that are unique to these service providers—traits that permeate the companies' service provision so much that these companies may be considered to be *branded*. Following is an examination of these shared traits.

Clearly Identifiable Uniqueness in Service

One thing that sets these companies apart from others is the fact that these companies provide their services in such a way that a consumer is able to easily identify the aspects of these firms that make them unique. At Marilyn Ihloff Salons, such identifiable habits include providing a hand massage, a make-up touch-up, a presentation of a basket of products, and a pre-booking for the next appointment, all free of charge and all to be provided to all clients on every single visit. These habits are intentionally quite visible to the customers, and are nearly as tangible as would be a physical product. Cold Stone Creamery is another establishment whose branded service habits are easily identified. Alycia de Mesa, author and freelance brand identity consultant comments, “On a weekend evening, you’ll find a greeter at the entrance [of Cold Stone Creameries] and be entertained in line as crew members enthusiastically sing while you’re looking at the larger than life images of ‘Ultimate Creations’” (“Cold Stone Creamery”). Again, the branded service traits exuded by the company’s employees are as concrete and easily identifiable as the multi-colored homemade ice cream the company serves. John Moore, former Starbucks marketing manager and author of Tribal Knowledge: Business Wisdom Brewed from the Grounds of Starbucks Corporate Culture sums up the differentiative

aspect (to coin a term) of the uniqueness of the branded service employee: “competitors can replicate products and programs but they can’t replicate people” (“Mimicking Whole Foods Market”). This inability to copy another company and its marketing-infused human resource strategy is the essence of service differentiation and is the key to a successful branded service employee program

Consistency

In an interview, when asked about the extent to which he believed that corporate-mandated service habits helped him to provide a unique service experience, one Quiktrip employee replied, “Every trip to a QT should be the same whether in Phoenix or Atlanta.” This consistency is perpetuated through several of Quiktrip’s corporately mandated brand habits which include greeting every customer, making eye contact with every customer, counting back change, maintaining no more than a 3:1 ratio of customers in line to employees at the register, and providing an experience closure which includes thanking the customer *and* asking every customer to return, every time a customer frequents a store. Customers begin to realize after a few visits that these habits are not limited to one nice, conscientious employee, but are standards that are consistently implemented. When the same customer visits other stores within the same company, perhaps even in different states, the consistency in branded habits company-wide is recognized by the customer even more.

Economy

Companies who successfully create branded service employees maintain a certain economy, a distinct resourcefulness that makes them a leader in their field. These companies seek out *and implement* best practices, especially with regard to marketing

and human resources. When dealing with an expansive company and its potentially large number of branches and employees, one may question the feasibility of such a streamlined foundation of service habits. Indeed, companies with numerous stores spread out nationally and possibly even internationally do face unique challenges when it comes to branding their service employees. One such challenge is the determining an effective method for selecting the “right” employees. Quiktrip has been able to minimize this challenge to a certain extent by engaging in centralized hiring. “Centralized hiring allows the company to maintain a consistent employee profile...[and] reduces the risk that a store manager who is pressured for time or not skilled in identifying talent will hire weak employees” (Bendapudi 2). Proactive, progressive hiring practices such as centralized hiring can greatly minimize confusion and enable firms to resolve many employee behavior concerns before they ever begin. Ultimately, it provides a standard that each employee, regardless of where he or she is employed within the company, must follow. The result is a clear brand that is observable in any and every location.

A Genuine Appreciation for Other Human Beings

Southwest Airlines is a company known for its affection for its clientele. Since its inception in 1967, the company’s reputation has been that of a *luv*-ing family and a customer advocate-especially those customers previously unable to fly due to financial limitations. Southwest’s founders were known as “mavericks” in the field because of the way they disregarded former conventions in the airline industry. Freiberg and Freiberg write of Southwest’s maverick executives and service providers, “...the professionals that customers encounter at Southwest are remarkably uninhibited and *empathetic* individuals who believe that the business of business is to make a profit *by serving people* and

making life more fun” (65, italics added). This genuine care for people, for *individual human beings*, is still upheld by Southwest employees and executives, which is a primary reason why Southwest Airlines has been the only airline to earn a profit every year since 1973 (4).

The decision to create branded service employees is a decision that must be completely embraced and embraced completely throughout the entire organization, from the CEO to the store maintenance workers, and everyone in between. It does require a significant investment, but the profit that comes from a company who agrees to “consider employees their living brand and devote a great deal of time and energy to training and developing them so that they reflect the brand’s core values” makes this investment worthwhile (Bendapudi 1). In light of this, one may wonder what a company must do to create branded service employees.

Creating Branded Service Employees

Create a Reputable Company Brand that Employees Appreciate, Affirm, and Respect

Bendapudi and Bendapudi write, “In retail, service is the manifestation of the brand, and service quality depends directly on employees’ attachment to the brand” (4). This principle is the cornerstone of a strongly branded service employee human resource model. Clearly, employees must understand and appreciate the value of their company’s brand on a personal level before they can affirm its value to their customers and become the manifestation of the brand itself. Employees must be completely on-board with branded service habits, and their acceptance of these habits must result in action. At Marilyn Ihloff, the extent to which interviewed employees believed that corporate-mandated service habits were helpful in providing a truly unique, defining experience

ranked a 10 on a 10-point scale. This type of acceptance is the heart of and the motivation behind a company's branded service. Such a respect of the company's brand creates loyal employee evangelists and customers who are excited about receiving the services offered by these devoted employees.

Define the Type of Employee Sought Before the Hiring Process Ever Takes Place

Ask a front-line employee who is paid little more than minimum wage what his company's mission is and he will probably be stumped; that is, assuming the company he works for has not attempted to create a Living Brand. Southwest Airlines on the other hand is a perfect example of a company who marries mission to human resources. "Fun is taken very seriously at Southwest Airlines, and the company's recruiting and hiring practices are based on the idea that humor can help people thrive during change, remain creative under pressure, work more effectively, play more enthusiastically, and stay healthier in the process" (Freiberg 64). The Freibergs go on to articulate Southwest's guiding principle when it comes to the hiring process: "hire people with the right spirit" (67). While this mandate may seem at first to be too abstract to implement in practical human resource management, it is indeed one of the most basic, foundational, concrete aspects of any company's hiring process. It is made so by the inclusion of the company's mission into the hiring practice. Such implementation provides a clear definition of the exact type of employee a company should seek out. For Southwest Airlines, this type of employee must be able to have fun at work and to incorporate her sense of humor into daily work activities. In order to capture this type of employee, during the interview process, prospective employees are asked to describe specifically how they have used their sense of humor in a work environment, or how they used it to address a difficult

situation. The interviewers take respondents' answers to this question very seriously. They realize that the responses to such questions reveal a prospect's intrinsic appreciation of the principles Southwest holds most dear. This truth was seen most clearly in one particular hiring situation in which a highly decorated military pilot, obviously very well qualified to fly for Southwest, was ultimately refused employment because it was revealed that upon arriving for his interview, he was unfriendly to the receptionist (68). This type of behavior was interview enough, and the pilot was immediately rejected.

Defining desired traits and then finding potential employees who naturally administer these traits requires time and focus, "but few companies that hire in the mass market have the discipline to go about doing that rationally and systematically or to think past such vague qualities as 'service orientation' and 'good work ethic'" (Bendapudi 2). Quiktrip is not one of those "few companies," but is instead an industry leader when it comes to finding the right people for their brand. Much of their ability to do so comes from a consistent, mission-focused hiring process and a brand-oriented training program. New-employee orientation at Quiktrip begins with a history of the company followed by an explanation of the core values that have sustained the company. This instruction continues throughout the initial training weeks and is continually reinforced over the course of one's entire tenure at Quiktrip.

Cold Stone Creamery is another company that has been able to pinpoint clearly defined brand-oriented tendencies embodied by prospective employees during the company's mission-focused hiring process. At Cold Stone Creamery, employee hopefuls must endure both an interview and an "audition" during which prospects must successfully complete a 4-step process which includes a "meet and greet," an icebreaker

which involves all other prospects (which can, at times, include up to 20 other people), the singing of both a solo and participation in an ensemble with other potential employees, and contribution to a “group effort” devised by the franchise owner which is intended to reveal one’s predisposal to working on a team. In this 4-step process, many participants disqualify themselves. Prospects who refuse to take part in this process or who do so with great and visible discomfort are not invited to work at Cold Stone. Ultimately, it is not the execution of the technical aspects of each task, but the willingness one has to participate and to be a good sport that signals to the interviewer who the most desired candidates are.

One way managers can simplify defining the type of employee who fits desired criteria is to quantify the hiring process. “Even if a company does have a clear wish list of employee behaviors, it needs to go one step further and decide whether to ‘make or buy’ . It must decide which skills and qualities can be taught and which must be hired” (Bendapudi 2). A manager might consider rating interviewees on a matrix which evaluates specific behaviors in light of their level of desirability. Assigning priority rankings to observed behaviors and summing these rankings helps to remove emotion and bias from the process, and helps isolate those prospects who truly have an aptitude for the sought after skills. HomeBanc Mortgage, an Atlanta-based mortgage company that serves states in the Southeast, implements a different type of quantitative evaluation module called the “Environmental Satisfaction Predictor.” This online module is a “cultural assessment” program that measures the desirable attributes exhibited by prospective employees (Customer Centricity). This instrument helps filter out applicants who do not

entirely fit the company's desired employee profile while effectively eradicating emotion and bias from the process.

Set High Expectations for Employees

According to the adage, "nothing worth having is ever easy." However, often it seems managers excessively simplify the brand-oriented processes in which employees are to be taking part. Some managers may reason that their employees are not capable or are too lazy to execute brand-specific initiatives. Their mindset is that it is easier to perform challenging, brand-specific tasks themselves. However, this mindset runs counter to that of the branded service employee. Bendapudi and Bendapudi assert, "Wawa and QT get more from their people because they expect more" (3). Employees will rise to the level of expectation imputed upon them. If that expectation is minimal, the results will be minimal. If the bar is set higher and employees refuse or are unable to attain desired service goals, the manager may decide that the employee is better suited for another company's brand. HomeBanc runs their new recruits through what Vice President of the Office of the Customer, Jamey Lutz, describes as an 8-week "boot camp" that requires prospects to attend 12-hour classes every work day for two months. The reward according to Lutz is that "associates that will be with us for the long haul" (Customer Centricity). Employees who endure rigorous training programs and are expected to produce prolifically, by nature of the demand, make an investment in their jobs. As the investment becomes more substantial, the employee becomes more attached, more engrained in the processes of the organization, resulting in a more rewarding work experience and greater respect for the mission of the company. This devotion, which translates into brand habits, is readily apparent to and appreciated by customers.

At Cold Stone Creamery, employees are held to high expectations with regard to both their service provision and their personal behavior while at work. Flirting and “sex talk” is not tolerated on the clock, even if employees are in the privacy of the company breakroom. The same goes for discussion of drugs and alcohol and the expression of profanity. The goal of maintaining such high personal standards within the store is, as one franchise owner purports, to teach employees *life skills* and skills that will help prepare employees for their next job. Employees are taught to be honest and accountable and that customer service always comes first.

Create a Culture that Includes both Employees and Customers

Over time, the high expectations put in place by management draw a company’s employees together into a culture that is focused on working as a team to become the most successful they can be at their jobs. Employees embody the principles of the company’s mission in a genuine, almost effortless manner. Freiberg and Freiberg describe the way this development of branded, mission-oriented culture has helped Southwest to be as successful as it has been throughout the years:

In truth, what Southwest has done has been to make mission, vision, and values the boss. Its principles are what make this organization fly. The covenants that serve its principles have glued this culture together so tightly that, even when Herb Kelleher is absent, the dream lives on (172).

This type of employee-employee culture generates a number of inherent benefits. One such benefit realized within the Quiktrip is future-focused employees. “Employees know that they can have a career at QT, due to its strong culture of promoting from within (3). This realization promotes a sense of job security among employees which in turn results in committed employees. It also lessens expensive employee turnover which pleases management and opens the door for a greater investment in said committed employees.

The culture ultimately benefits both managers and employees, and results in a workforce that is more knowledgeable of and committed to the company's mission than ever, thus resulting in increased mission-oriented branded service.

Another result of Quiktrip's strong internal culture is that of increased teamwork. This teamwork effectively dissolves the "us' versus 'them'" mentality between disgruntled front-line employees and their managers, apparent at so many other companies that do not appreciate a strong internal culture (Bendapudi 3). Ultimately, a sense of contentment permeates the staff, and this contentment is readily apparent to the company's customers. Customers observe that "the people who [work] at the stores [seem] to be glad to be there and they [seem] to like one another" (4). This camaraderie among employees is widespread within the company, which consequently reinforces the consistency of this culture, effectively helping to promote the brand.

Obviously, a branded service firm's culture must also include its customers. The Bendapudis emphasize that a strong service firm employee-customer culture must focus on "simplifying customers' lives, which can mean sacrifices when it comes to profits." For Quiktrip, maintaining a healthy employee-customer culture meant discontinuing sales of adult magazines which resulted in an annual loss of over \$1 million (4). However, such customer-oriented sacrifices lead to customer loyalty which enables such firms to recoup these profits.

Ultimately, it is the strong employee-customer relationships that promote the type of culture a customer comes to appreciate in a branded service firm. One Quiktrip employee notes, "Many customers think of the employees at QT as friends...I personally try to make every customer I wait on feel that they have received personal attention from

me.” In their HBR article, the Bendapudis speak of a specific manifestation of this “friendship.” The couple describes how one Wawa convenience store temporarily closed its doors to hold a wedding for a couple who met over coffee at the store. Store associates were invited to the wedding and many were in attendance (4). One of the most impressive aspects of both Quiktrip’s and Wawa’s employee-customer culture is the fact that both companies reside in an industry that is clogged with competition. Nellie Lide of the McGinn Group, a marketing firm in Arlington, VA, acknowledges the challenge of building a strong employee-customer culture within commodity-type services, and provides suggestions on how to resolve the issue:

...services might be commodities, but you never, ever want your customers to feel like they too, are just commodities. A successful business will make each of its clients feel special by understanding and addressing their unique requirements, and quickly solving problems when they come up. This is really hard, which is why it may very well be the most important way for a business to stand out from its customers (“Is Customer Service Everything?”).

A strong employee-customer culture can be one of the most compelling differentiating factors within a saturated industry.

Executives at HomeBanc Mortgage believe that at the heart of a healthy employee-customer culture is, quite simply, satisfied employees. The company implements what it calls a “Formula for Success,” a process that ties associate satisfaction to net income. VP Jamey Lutz, comments, “...at HomeBanc, the most important thing is associate satisfaction. If associates aren’t happy with resources they’re being provided, they don’t go out of their way to provide good customer service” (Customer Centricity). Employee satisfaction also reinforces other aspects of a branded service organization such as a focus on long-term employment and the fostering of an entrepreneurial spirit within the organization’s employees.

Charge Employees with an Entrepreneurial Mission and Hold Them Accountable

At Quiktrip, employees are indoctrinated with a number of qualities that are intended to promote a sense of ownership, and while the principles would seem simple enough (be the best, never be satisfied, focus long-term, do what is right for the company, do the right thing), one cannot deny that even these most basic of principles are often the very principles which separate a branded service firm from one that is not. It is the regular teaching of these qualities (which, at Quiktrip, comes through four mandatory “Skills Schools” which are held over the first 120 days of one’s employment) and the consistent implementation and reinforcing of these basic principles that evoke a service standard (one might say a *brand*) that makes clients and customers notice something different about the company and the service it provides.

While it is essential, instilling brand philosophy is only part of a Quiktrip employee’s indoctrination. Employees are also taught how read the company’s financial statements and are then shown how their individual performance affects companywide financial performance, and how, through an employee’s hard work (or lack thereof), the company arrives at financial targets. The sense of ownership that comes from such practices forces employees to think more about the business results of their actions rather than simply how they will be perceived by their superiors. It encourages employees to “transcend functional boundaries” and to appreciate the practical side of the rules and regulations, and to be empowered to bend or break them if it is clear that doing so will ultimately serve the customer in a manner consistent with the company’s mission. Owner-oriented employees are proactive and are focused on follow-up (Freiberg 97). They pay attention to the details others fail to notice, like the piece of paper on the floor

that has been ignored by others. Herb Kelleher often speaks of such an employee-owner incident in which he was once encouraged to tie Southwest Airlines' pilot incentive pay to fuel conservation. Kelleher recollects, "I kept telling the guy we didn't need to do that. Our pilots just did it on their own" because of a strong sense of ownership—an entrepreneurial spirit that had been fostered throughout the course of these pilots' tenure at Southwest (105). Such a mindset comes only from a belief among all employees that what they are doing makes a difference.

Just as corporate CEOs and small-business owners are accountable for every business decision they make, branded service employees must also be held accountable for consistently performing the unique, definable aspects of their job in a consistent manner. At Marylin Ihloff salons, corporate-mandated habits are taken seriously. If an employee falls short on performing brand habits, he or she is "talked to" by management. One employee noted, "usually it doesn't go any further than that," but if it does, the employee in question is written up and may ultimately be terminated. At Quiktrip, employees are visited and evaluated by what the company refers to as "secret/mystery shoppers." The purpose of these visits is to make sure that all employees are adhering to corporate-mandated brand habits. Employees are rewarded after successful secret-shopper visits with an instant \$50 bonus and an increased store bonus level. However, if employees consistently fail to exhibit brand habits, they may receive reprimands, written warnings, and ultimately, termination. Brand habits must be taken seriously by both employees and managers, and managers in the service industry must be prepared to rectify situations that tarnish their brand, just as retail managers must be prepared to remove defective products from their store shelves.

Put Previous Experience in its Place

Obviously, when hiring a new employee, consideration of previous related work experience is important to a certain extent. In technical fields, previous experience is essential in all but the most entry-level positions. It can also help an employee transition into a new position or career a little more smoothly. However, it is important to keep in mind that the acquisition of many job- and brand-specific disciplines can be obtained through a comprehensive training program. Intrinsic motivators, on the other hand, are nearly impossible to teach. At Southwest Airlines, assuming all technical and trade-oriented skills are present, the primary focus of hiring managers is to find applicants who are "self starters with an entrepreneurial spirit" (Freiberg 98). Quiktrip's Manager of Store Operations Training, Chuck McAbee, comments that while previous experience is a plus, it is not required to be a successful employee at Quiktrip, and that many of QuikTrip's part time employees have no previous experience whatsoever. Franchise owners within the Cold Stone Creamery family also rarely require any previous experience of applicants. This is not to say that previous experience should be disregarded altogether. However, many successful firms effectively hire for attitude and train for skills (Freiberg 66). It is often this attitude that properly exemplifies a company's brand, perhaps even more so than does one's skills.

Allow Employees to Share in the Success of Other Employees and the Firm as a Whole

An important part of the culture of branded service oriented organizations is that of celebration. Executives of such organizations intentionally go to the trouble to invite front-line employees to take part in the successes of the company. Quiktrip makes the sharing of success a *policy* within the company. If a "mystery shopper" reports being

especially impressed on a visit to a Quiktrip store, *everyone* working the “shopped” shift receives a bonus “because the company believes that individual rewards would undermine the message that all employees contribute to the customer’s experience” (Bendapudi 5). Wawa is also known for their effective employee rewards programs which include a “prize patrol” that throws paries for selected employees and stores for a multitude of different reasons.

Profit-sharing is another effective way of transferring an employee’s hard work into a tangible reward. Southwest Airlines has in place a powerful and motivational profit-sharing plan. No doubt, the success behind its profit-sharing plan rests in the fact that it is also tied to the spirit of the company and its mission. Gary Barron, Southwest’s Chief Operations Officer, comments, “It’s not the only profit-sharing plan in the airline business, but, historically, it is the only profit-sharing plan that was implemented by a company *simply because the board thought it was the right thing to do*” (Freiberg 100, italics added). An investment program implemented for the right reasons, that is consistent with the company’s mission, results in an army of employees who “take pride in constantly looking for ways to cut costs and increase the efficiency of the operation without sacrificing customer service” (101). The financial investment that executives choose to put in to their front-line employees results in a reciprocal investment on the part of these employees, in which they conscientiously attempt to improve the brand through their hard work. Ultimately, the entire company (and, consequentially, its brand) benefits from allowing employees to share in the successes of other individual employees and in the firm as a whole.

Empower Employees

While strict adherence to specific brand habits is highly encouraged in a service firm that promotes branded service, such adherence is not to come at the expense of the customer. Empowerment of individual employees helps to balance maverick entrepreneurial spirit with blind adherence to regulations. At Marylin Ihloff, one employee reports that half of her personal service habits were instituted by the firm, and the other half came from her own instinct and personality. The same breakdown was reported among Quiktrip employees. These firms, both successful at creating Living Brands, are able to recognize that rules do not produce revenues; people do. Employees are indoctrinated with the company's values, and "because they understand the company's values, employees don't have to follow a rigid set of rules—they just have to behave in ways that meet customer needs" (Bendapudi 5). Under the guidance of the company's brand habits, employees are able to prioritize work-related behavior in a way that ultimately benefits the company, even if it occasionally means bending the rules.

Communicate with Employees Often and Openly

Just as with a healthy marriage, open, honest communication within an organization is essential. Regular communication with employees signals trust. It implies value. Frank communication allows employees to see the "humanity" of the corporation, and lets employees experience the true meaning of a company's brand. At Quiktrip, such communication comes through monthly store team meetings and monthly one-on-one meetings. At times, the topic of discussion involves the company's honest ownership of executive mistakes. For example Quiktrip executives readily admitted what CEO Chet Cadieux refers to as "missteps" when the company installed gasoline pumps along store

sidewalks. After Quiktrip employees shared customer grumblings about the layout with corporate executives, they quickly and publicly acknowledged the misstep and made appropriate changes (Bendapudi 5). When the employees realized that they were truly instruments of change in the corporation, that through their efforts, significant changes that affected customer satisfaction were implemented, the company's mission was made real to them in a way no program or pep rally could replicate.

The tool of communication is not only useful for the *conveyance* of the company's mission to its employees; it is also essential in the *reinforcement* of these principles. One creative way Southwest Airlines reinforced its mission in the hearts and minds of its employees was by providing all employees with a copy of its mission statement in oversized boxes of Cracker Jacks (Freiberg 118). The efficacy of this type of gesture clearly transcended that of other possible methods in that employees were not only refamiliarized with the company's mission, but were also made aware of the personal concern upper management had with each of them by choosing to perform this otherwise mundane task in a thoughtful, creative manner.

Treat Employees with Respect

Mutual respect between service employees and employers is crucial to providing employees with a sense of ownership that coincides with a culture of branded service. Gary Barron, former Chief Operations Manager of Southwest Airlines, affirms this concept: "You can't wait until contract negotiations and ask them to trust you and agree to things they don't believe in, and then go out and stab them in the back for the five years of the contract because you got an agreement. Just like any other relationship, it takes a long time" (Freiberg 109). Southwest employees have been able to cultivate such

a relationship because they know that “Herb would never ask [them] to do anything he isn’t willing to do himself” (111). This is the type of mutual respect that must be present between employer and employee as well as between a branded service organization and its customers.

Branded Service is Not...

While the realm of branded service is obviously quite vast, a number of service habits do not fall under the umbrella of branded service. This is not to say that they are bad (although not all are good); it is simply to say that branded service is distinguished and is separate from some other commonly experienced customer service systems.

“Flair”

In the movie *Office Space*, a character portraying a TGI Fridays-esque restaurant employee is chastised repeatedly by her manager for her lack of “flair.” One may infer that this seemingly treasured nugget of superior customer service was actually nothing more than a collection of pins and badges the waitstaff was *encouraged* to wear by management. The thought behind the managerial admonition was that the “flair” was supposedly an expression of an employee’s personality. While individual personality is definitely a significant part of branded service, the compulsory sporting of obnoxious paraphernalia is merely a mockery of such service. This type of behavior suppresses employee empowerment and shows disrespect to employees by insisting that they make fools of themselves in front of their customers. As a result, the employees are also disrespected by the customers.

Good Customer Service

While superior customer service is one of the natural results of branded service, it is not the essence of branded service. Many companies provide good customer service without actually providing branded service. The difference rests primarily in the incorporation of mission-specific service habits. If an employee's customer service is not laden with the company's mission, it is simply good service. But branded service, service that is infused with the company's mission, is the consistent, unique service that is in place to benefit human beings and not simply the company, and is clearly identifiable from store to store among all employees.

Customer Coddling

Many companies attempt to reach the high-end market in a unique way. Expensive hotels have done so for years, leaving candy on the pillow and folding the end of the toilet paper roll into a neat point. Such attention to detail, while again is a natural *result* of branded service, is *not* in and of itself branded service. The difference again comes down to the presence of a company's mission in the service provided, and the desire to benefit human beings rather than the company. Branded service is not simply a catering to upper class clientele. On the contrary, some of the most effective branded services (e.g. Quiktrip, Southwest Airlines) are provided to *all* consumer classes. The customer's ability to spend is never a consideration when it comes to providing truly branded service.

The Branded Service Employee is the key to differentiation within the services industry. Her zeal for the company brand, mutually respectful relationships with both management and customers, investment in the company's policies and culture, and

perfect fit into a company with mission-oriented, clearly defined expectations and healthy communication, produce a consistent, unique synergy that is easily identified by even the most sporadic of customers. While branded service is often a compilation of many customer service strategies, it is exclusive and unique and goes well beyond simply providing *good* service. In light of the fact that roughly 70% of the economic output in developed countries rests in the service sector, it very well may be one of the most significant marketing strategies since sliced bread.

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Appendix I

Firm Level Questions

The following questions are to be posed to HR managers and store managers in participating stores. The intentions of the following questions are to determine the type of employee a firm looks for in the interview process, to determine methods firms use to promote branded employee behavior, and to determine methods firms implement to foster and maintain specific (one may say *branded*) service traits.

1. Can you describe some desired traits of prospective employees you look for during the interview process?
2. Are there any absolutes that you look for during the interview process that will “make or break” an interviewee? If so, what are they?
3. To what extent are the traits you look for encouraged by Corporate? That is, are the traits you look for highly encouraged by Corporate, or are they traits exclusive to *your* preference?
4. What percentage of employees must embody what percentage of desirable traits?
5. What type of previous training and experience do you look for in a prospective employee?
6. Once an employee is hired, what service traits *unique to your firm* do you try to foster in him or her?
7. What sort of training is provided to employees to help them exhibit the service traits that are desired in your firm?
8. What sort of *ongoing* observation/training is provided to ensure that employees maintain and grow in the service traits that are desired in your firm?
9. What sort of evaluation process is implemented in order to provide feedback to employees about the specific service traits desired in your firm?
10. Are there any service behaviors that you absolutely demand? That you absolutely discourage?
11. Are there any service behaviors that, should an employee fail to exhibit them, would result in a specific consequence? What would the consequence(s) be?

Appendix II

Employee Level Questions

The following questions are to be posed to employees within the type of firm that maintains a standard of service that is specific and are unique to the firm. The purposes of the questions are to determine the extent to which employees understand the uniqueness of their service provision, and the extent to which they practice this uniqueness.

1. What previous training do you have that you feel prepared you for this specific position (if any)?
2. When you went through the interview and training process, what emphases on unique service behavior did you notice (if any)?
3. What are there service “habits” you are to implement with every transaction, as instructed by your manager or through specific training?
4. To what extent do you personally believe that corporate-mandated service “habits” help you to provide a *unique* service experience? (scale of 1-10?)
5. To what extent do you personally believe that corporate-mandated service “habits” are relevant and effective? (scale of 1-10?)
6. What do you do when you provide services at your store to distinguish yourself from employees of other similar companies?
7. What distinguishing services do you provide that you feel could easily transfer to another service-oriented company? Which ones would *not* transfer easily?
8. What happens when employees fail to implement company-mandated service habits (i.e. punitive measures)?
9. What is the process you go through in serving a customer?
10. In contemplating the process you go through when serving a customer, what percentage of the process is defined by the company, and what percentage of the process comes from what you consider to be common sense, instinct, or personality?
11. What aspects of your service process do you feel other companies would truly benefit from, regardless of whether they provide a similar service or not?

Appendix III

Customer Level Questions

The following questions are to be posed to customers of a participating company's individual stores. The intentions of the following questions are to determine the level to which customers recognize unique corporate-mandated service "habits" of the companies in question, and the extent to which these habits influence one's decision to patronize the particular store. The interview is intentionally short and may be adapted to a survey.

1. How regularly would you say you come to a store owned by this company?
2. What percentage of your business does this particular company receive as opposed to other companies that offer a similar service?
3. If you are out of town or otherwise away from home, how likely are you to look for this particular company's stores?
4. What do you notice about the provision of service within this company that differs from the provision of service within other similar companies?
5. What are 2 service factors that motivate you to return to this company's stores rather than searching out another similar company's stores?
6. How *consistent* would you say this company's stores are in their provision of service (*not* product)?
7. To what degree do you feel you would be inclined to continue returning to this company's store if you noticed inconsistencies in its employee's services?