

Passion + Energy = Success or Survival

By Faith Monson

According to a recent statistic, 46 percent of small businesses say they're currently not profitable. That sounds bad....until you realize that means that 54 percent ARE making a profit, despite the recession.

They say that "when the going gets tough, the tough get going." You may not be able to control the Dow Jones Average or the price of gasoline, but you can control your attitude, and you can model and require great customer service from your employees.

Just having a good product today isn't enough. Consumers are demanding more for their money, and that includes not only more service and more value for their dollar but a more satisfying buying experience overall. "Business as usual" won't do the trick.

Think of it this way. Customers are uncertain about the future. Many are afraid that they might lose their jobs. Others have already done so. Purchases that didn't get a second thought last year are now being re-examined. Business-to-business sales are also affected by anxiety in the marketplace. Purchasing managers are stretching out the time between purchases, doing more with less and suggesting that employees buy less expensive alternatives or do without.

All that anxiety means that when a customer breaks down and decides to go shopping, it's an act of courage and faith. Courage, because money spent won't be around later if it's needed and faith that income will outlast expenses. Customers in this edgy mood need to be reassured, because it won't take much for them to decide to forego the expense.

So what experience does that edgy, fearful customer have in your store or business? Does anyone greet them at the door, thank them for coming, and offer assistance? Are salespeople still congregating behind the counter, waiting to be hauled away by the customer? Could your sales people answer a question about your merchandise or service if they were asked?

Do your employees look enthusiastic to be there—or like they're watching the clock? Would a customer get the impression that employees care, that they have a sense of ownership in the company and pride in the merchandise? Are employees humming with energy, or humming to themselves in indifference?

How about you, the owner? Are you still counting on "doing business by accident" because it worked for you before the downturn? Are you investing in marketing and public relations to keep your company (and the solution you provide) in front of consumers?

I had an experience lately that truly drove this point home. In the Washington, D.C. area where I live, a number of restaurants have gone under due to the economy. But one local eatery is going great guns. As I watched the bustle on a Friday night, I noticed the elements that contribute to its success when so many others have failed. For one thing, they serve food that is consistently excellent. They never have an “off night.” They’re a dependable place to go for a good meal. Next, I was greeted at the door by an employee who actually looked happy to see me, someone who was smiling and engaged. When I asked a question, my waiter was helpful and responsive—and she answered my questions. Employees seemed to actually be passionate about their work; so much so that the person who purchased the restaurant’s salmon from a new vendor stopped by my table to see how we liked it and seemed genuinely thrilled that we were happy.

Everyone who worked there seemed prepared and positive. They took obvious pride in doing their jobs well, and it showed in a sense of ownership. They were positive people and seemed excited about what they were doing. When I left, they said “see you again” like they meant it. It might not have been the bar from Cheers where “everybody knows your name,” but I felt as if they would actually remember me and look forward to my return.

Over the top? Maybe. But that restaurant is thriving. If your customers have a choice between a place humming with energy and positive vibes and a place where the help is counting the minutes until the end of their shifts, where do you think they’d rather spend their precious disposable income?

Regardless of your industry, you can take a lesson from the restaurant story. Explain to your staff how customer satisfaction directly relates to staying in business. Reward them for exceeding expectations and acting like the host. Motivate them by bringing in speakers and sharing success stories because like everyone else, your employees are worried by the stories they see on the news. Get rid of poor performers and provide incentives for great service.

The companies that survive a recession have more than a great product. They have great people who passionately believe they can help their customers and provide value. The bar’s been set higher than ever before. Do you and your employers measure up?

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