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Listen Sweetheart, you have my undivided attention...

Recently a client decided they should do a quick national test survey of their competitors and prospective competitors to help them pitch their products for their next financial year.

When we took on the task we adopted the position that, although there was neither the time nor finance available to carry out a proper scientific study, it should be as widespread as possible to cover the small, medium, large and global operators at national level. This, we felt, would give our client a more comprehensive study and thus leave them better equipped to complete their budget strategies.

Our sample testing revealed many useful indicators for our client. It also revealed two quite shocking trends, almost universally across the board, in the corporate world.

The first trend we found is that the front-line staff, or gatekeepers, are, to a substantial extent, quite obviously poorly trained. Here are a few examples from company telephone operators:

"Can you hold or just go?". "I don't know who would do that". "This is the corporate office and we don't deal with that". "We don't need calls like this". "You'll have to ring them separately, I don't know what they do". "Ma'am, that office is long dead". "No, we can't transfer you, we're just corporate headquarters". "One moment please, I'll have to ask my associate..." (and the operator forgot to press the hold button whereupon we heard a gospel according to one gatekeeper - some of it, for publishing reasons, cannot be repeated). "Ma'am, he's dead for years". "We only list our employees by name". "Do you want to call the state government?" "I'm not that familiar with the company". "How do I know who you want to talk to". "Honey, I'll put you on now". "Listen love, that department's out to lunch". "Ma'am you can't talk to him".

The second trend we found was that, once through to the correct department, there was generally speaking, an inclination towards being tired, listless, dreary, and lackluster performance. Here are some examples from the second-line personnel:

"Listen dear, I'm not in that department" (and hung up). "I think I can get that information..... Hey, Joanne, grab some of those water bottles and take them up here....yeah, I can get you that". "Heain'ttalkintonobody". "I'll put you on to security, they might know". "The mailroom gal will get you that information". "Lordy, I'm callin' my own number, that's why it's engaged". "There's no @ sign on our e-mail address". "ThisisJohnsonI'moutcallback". "Ball here". "We'vejustmovedwhatdayawant?" "I'll transfer you to Kirby now honey" (whereupon we were transferred to Kirby's voicemail which informed us he was on vacation for three weeks!!) "Who are you dealing with at this moment now here?" "We are the world's best....company. We deal with everything and nothing". "Yes honey, you just stay where you are for a moment". The crème de la crème was when one gentleman told me personally, "Listen sweetheart, you have my undivided attention".

The general modus operandi in responding to simple questions, for both categories, was towards hasty, ill-thought out, obviously distracted, and motivation lacking reply.

In this uncertain economic climate employers must be competitive if they are to sell their products and services. The essence of success is a workforce that is polite, knowledgeable about the operation, informed about company policies and updates, and above all, capable of communicating coherently with customers, potential customers and stockholders.

The most important people in your company are your front-line staff - your gatekeepers. They are the backbone of your business. They should be solid, sensible and composed people. To achieve a combination of these attributes, they need to be properly trained on a consistent basis.

Most companies do not consider, for example, that their lawn maintenance crews or their janitorial staff as gatekeepers. They very definitely are, and they also need training.

Imagine a situation of your company in crisis. Who would have envisaged September 11th? Let us all hope there will be no more such cowardly acts. But, every company has a crisis from time to time, and preparation, with written policies and directives, are essential elements for dealing with a crisis.

Again, using your imagination, a journalist - with a deadline - cannot get a company spokesperson to make a statement. Their editor has demanded a story. That journalist will, given the opportunity, interview the nearest and most accessible employee. That person could be in lawn maintenance or janitorial services. Then, where is your company? Probably scrambling for survival as well as dealing with a crisis.

The number of apparently untrained front-line gatekeepers is quite shocking, particularly in the medium to large companies. How do we measure if these people are assisting in the overall productivity of our company? You trust them to deal with questions and issues about which they neither have the time nor the skills to cope. Generally, these gatekeepers deal with hundreds of people in a workday. The real question is, are they dealing effectively with their overwhelming workload, or are they, through a lack of training, merely passing the buck to some other hapless employee, or worst case scenario, trying to deal with company questions and business for which they are ill-equipped and not trained?

Your front-line staff can put your company into a crisis. You lose a frustrated major client and there's your crisis.

You might take a close look at your front-line staff and see where you need, as part of your management function, to close the holes in your company's leaking vessel of communications and training policies.