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putting the customer at the heart of the business

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**The North American Conference on Customer Management
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How Seattle Uses The 'CLICK' Method to Create Happy Basketball Fans

*Starbucks, the Pike Place Fish Market, Microsoft, Nirvana...Seattle has a habit of surprising us with creative revolutionaries. Here's another: a pair of sports' teams that puts customers first. **Pete Winemiller** explains how the Seattle Supersonics and Seattle Storm Basketball Teams use the CLICK methodology to improve their customer experience.*

When the Seattle Supersonics reached the championship rounds of the NBA Playoffs in 1996, our fans were part of a frenzied scene and not focused on the care they were receiving from our staff at Seattle's Key Arena.

Knowing we couldn't guarantee annual trips to the NBA finals, we decided to emphasize consistent customer care to enhance the customer experience and ensure loyalty. Creating repeat customers requires chipping away at achieving loyalty by doing a lot of things well that make a difference.

We focused on three key areas:

- 1) Creating a division dedicated to handling fan concerns
- 2) Focusing the franchise on a 'fans-first' culture, with extensive training for all front-line arena employees and referring to all ticket buyers as 'guests', and
- 3) Regarding negative feedback as 'free consulting'. We encourage our guests to be forthcoming with problems.

To ensure this approach was profitable we tied it to season ticket holder loyalty and emphasized that "front-line" employees significantly affect the bottom line. We know we can't change the team's success on the court, but we can control the culture and delivery of consistent, first-class service in the arena.

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Since landing a new customer nine times more expensive than retaining an existing one, we measure our success by season ticket holder retention, our largest source of revenue. Exemplary guest care results in greater loyalty. With our emphasis on guest relations, our “guest care” culture has evolved. It empowers employees to attend to guests’ needs through an interactive “attitude of invitation.”

In short, we learn how to CLICK!:

- Communicate courteously with guests.
- Listen to learn, rather than respond.
- Initiate immediately so guests’ concerns are met quickly and effectively.
- Create connections so guests know they are among hospitable friends.
- Know your stuff so guests know they are interacting with a professional.

CLICK! Is based on extensive training and incentives. Once employees are “CLICK! Certified,” they take ownership of a guest’s problem and create solutions quickly. As an equation, it reads: Know Your Stuff + Listen to Learn + Go with Your Heart = Being a Problem Solver!

Business goes where it’s invited, but stays where it’s appreciated. The fans-first culture has solidly contributed to season ticket holder retention. Successful businesses think big and focus on big goals, such as achieving high customer retention, but move toward those goals by acting small.

In the NBA, you can’t control the play on the floor. And there are many aspects of your business that you can’t control. But the one thing you can control is how you treat your customers. Each day you have the chances to create loyalty with your customers, who, after all, are your “guests.”

As Howard Schultz, chairman of Starbucks Coffee Co. and the Seattle Sonics, has said, “Starbucks is not in the coffee business serving people, but in the people business serving coffee”

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What business are you in? Do you serve your industry first and the people you call customers second? Have you done a touch-point audit of your business to see if your actions speak as loud as your words? If you come up short, ask the question that professional sport teams are asking: "Do you think like the fan or the franchise?"

About the author: Pete Winemiller is the Vice President of Service Development for the NBA's Seattle Sonics and the WNBA's Seattle Storm. He has presented at NACCM 2006 and chaired our related event, CCSE (Celebrating Customer Service Excellence) 2008.
pwinemiller@sonics-storm.com