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WOWED Factor: A Key To Business Differentiation

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I pull up to the five-minute passenger pick-up area at the airport. I've been there many times before, and I'm used to hearing a harsh directive: "You've got to move your car now!" Not this time. A woman comes over to my car and introduces herself. Evelyn asks me whom I'm picking up. "My wife," I answer. "Where has she been?" Not what we're used to from security officials in our post-9/11 world. She leaves, and about five minutes later returns and nicely asks me to please move the car. She says that she'll look for me when I circle back through. She even asks me what my wife looks like so that she'll be able to alert her that I'm circling.

I just experienced the WOWEDFactor™.

Definition: a personal experience a customer has with an employee of a business that is perceived by the customer to be so humanizing, engaging or connecting, that the customer's perception of that individual, and consequently the business, becomes significantly enhanced.

Having customers experience the WOWEDFactor™ can enhance business and so it makes sense to establish a culture where it is delivered more often by more employees.

I am the principal of the Ethical Selling Institute, a subsidiary of Sempact, Inc. We provide training, speaking (keynotes, breakouts) and coaching services to businesses and organizations on how to pull ahead of the competition by building more of the EthicalFactor™, which is comprised of Trust (genuineness), Credibility (believability) and Partnership (customer focus and accountability), in to their products and services. We believe that the ability of businesses and organizations to deliver the EthicalFactor™ has much more to do with crucial interactions employees have with customers/clients/guests/patients than with what's in a mission statement or customer commitment policy. (Hereinafter, any reference to businesses should be read to include orga-

nizations and any references to customers should be read to include clients/guests/patients.)

It should be noted that our definition of selling is not the conventional one. We take a broad look; selling encompasses *any interaction that influences perceptions of service image*. Thus, all people who have contact with customers are involved in "selling."

WOWEDFactor™ = Significant Differentiator

Since our inception 18 years ago, we have continually found that businesses that successfully differentiate themselves and add greater perceived value to their products and services do so because of their ability to deliver more of the EthicalFactor™ at *crucial moments of truth* than their competition. And many times, these business-enhancing "happenings" are interactions customers have with specific employees that are *so significant* they reach the WOWEDFactor™ level.

The WOWEDFactor™ *doesn't happen until it's happened*. Notice, we don't call it the WOWFactor. It's past tense intentionally. It doesn't exist until a customer perceives it to have happened to him or her. A business can only say its objective is to build its value by having its customers experience the WOWEDFactor™ with its employees. A customer doesn't experience the WOWEDFactor™ with *ACME Tool and Rental*; she experiences it with *Pete, Judy or Tom who work for ACME Tool and Rental*. It's a personal experience and people have personal experiences with people – not businesses. Thus, the extent to which businesses deliver the WOWEDFactor™ has everything to do with their employees and their crucial interactions with customers. The business-enhancing impact of doing so can be significant.

Tom Peters tells the story of a hurried individual who goes into Beltramo's Liquor Store in

Palo Alto, California and presents his American Express card for payment of his purchase. It seems to the customer that American Express takes an inordinate amount of time to approve the transaction. His frustration grows with every second.

With whom is he angry? Not American Express. He's angry at Beltramo's. More specifically, his anger is directed at the clerk behind the counter. Is this rational behavior? Clearly not. Beltramo's and the clerk have done nothing wrong. Notwithstanding how Judge Judy might rule on who is the culpable party, the clerk realizes that the only judge who matters is the customer. And, he is in the process of being tried and convicted unless he takes action. Finally, American Express approves. The insightful employee, who happens to be a Beltramo's "stakeholder," takes a five-cent mint from behind the counter, puts it in the customer's bag along with his purchase and receipt and says, "I'm sorry you were delayed; it's inexcusable. Thanks for shopping with us. Please consider coming back again." Result: successful delivery of the WOWEDFactor™ and, consequently, a recovered customer. Cost: five cents.

I worked with a computer distributor who sells the same products with the same bells and whistles as everyone else in the computer business. In discussing how they differentiate their offerings from others who sell the same products at the same prices, they told me their best differentiator was the person who installed the computer system, who decided to *gently place it*, not *slam it down*, on the customer's table. Their mission statement reflects their attitude: "Our sustainable advantage will come from our people." Put another way, "Our sustainable advantage will come from our internal customers delivering the WOWEDFactor™ to our external customers."

A company can spend a lot of money on advertising, décor, mission statements and brochures. **The ultimate influencer of service**

image, however, is the company person with whom the customer is dealing. I am not aware of anybody who walked into a place of business, looked at the company logo or decor and said, “Wow, that looks great, I’m going to become a customer for life.” I’ve seen a lot of mission statements and can’t recall one that read, “Our sustainable advantage will come from the colors we use in our brochure.”

Some WOWEDFactor™ sightings:

- **Harriet.** Four years ago, I was writing a column about a fast food restaurant that purported to have the best burger. Regardless of how good that burger was ... and it was better than most, it was not even on the WOWEDFactor™ radar screen because it was not a personal interaction that humanized, engaged or connected. What was, however, was my experience with Harriet, the minimum wage server, who treated me like I was a *guest in her home*.
- **Brent.** My good friends’ son was a front-desk clerk at an up-scale hotel in Denver. A guest called the desk and was frantic because he was supposed to attend a black-tie event in a half hour and he had failed to pack his dress shoes. All he had were his beat-up running shoes. He wanted to know where he could buy the shoes in the neighborhood. Brent explained that there was no place nearby, but finding they wore the same size, offered to swap his own shoes for the night.
- **Jamal.** Checking into a hotel in Atlanta that I last stayed at six months before, two things of note happen. As I was walking to the elevator to go up to my room, the concierge caught my eye, smiled and said, “Welcome back.” When I got to my room, there was a form letter from the “General Manager” explaining how they appreciate my business and asking me to call with any problems. The former experience was a WOWEDFactor™ that enhanced the value of my hotel stay; the latter was not.

WOWEDFactor™ Truisms

We believe the following to be true about the WOWEDFactor™:

- Service is manufactured at the point of delivery. To my knowledge, not one customer has ever approached a business, asked to see the mission statement and then declared, “Very impres-

sive, I’m now a customer for life.”

- The service image of a business is influenced in large part by employees’ interactions with external customers.
- Employees are the company in the minds of customers.
- The extent to which employees perceive themselves as stakeholders within a business has a direct relationship on their motivation to deliver the WOWEDFactor™.
- Managers’ first customers are their employees who interface with external customers. Managers’ number one objective should be to set up a culture where employees perceive they are stakeholders.
- Research substantiates that the reasons why customers quit businesses have much more to do *with not receiving the WOWEDFactor™* than anything else. A much-quoted survey of consumer habits shows that sixty-eight percent of all lost business results from the indifferent, uncaring attitudes of employees toward customers and only fourteen percent is lost because of product dissatisfaction. The results on Why Customers Quit:
 - o 68 percent - indifferent attitude of employee
 - o 14 percent - product dissatisfaction
 - o 9 percent - competitive reasons
 - o 5 percent - other friends
 - o 3 percent - move away
 - o 1 percent – die
- If customers quit businesses in large part because of an attitude of indifference on the part of employees, it stands to reason that the antithesis, delivering the WOWEDFactor™, is a significant reason why customers stay.

Establishing a WOWEDFactor™ Culture

It is clear that there is significant opportunity for businesses to further differentiate their offerings with regular delivery of the WOWEDFactor™. The question becomes, then, how do businesses establish a culture where employees “take it to the house” more often with more customers. How do they establish a WOWEDFactor™ culture?

It all comes down to how businesses motivate their employees. According to a 1995

George Mason University study, **true motivators** are factors that foster an inner desire to work by satisfying certain needs important to the individual. **Maintainers**, on the other hand, are factors that must be kept at a satisfactory level in order for employees to maintain performance. The study asked employees to rank ten factors in terms of their motivational value. Managers and supervisors then were asked to rank the same ten factors in terms of how *they thought* their employees would rank them. The results differed. Employees said they were best motivated by: 1) being in an interesting work environment, 2) being fully appreciated for the work they do and 3) feeling that they are in on things. Managers and supervisors said they *thought* their employees would say they were motivated by: 1) good wages, 2) job security and 3) promotion and growth.

The three factors that managers and supervisors thought were most important to employees are not **motivators** but **maintainers**. Regarding wages, for example, employees want their pay at a level consistent with employees doing similar tasks for other companies. An “inner desire” is not created, however, by good pay. In order to get employees to recognize and deliver on the WOWEDFactor™, the lifeline to satisfying and keeping customers, businesses need to do more than “maintain performance.” The more that employees feel humanized, engaged or connected by their managers (sound familiar?), the more job “ownership” they perceive and the more energy and insight they bring to their interactions with their customers.

Here’s what it’s about: If managers can bring home the WOWEDFactor™ to their internal customers (employees), they will establish a culture where employees perceive ownership, and that will beget greater differentiation with external customers and enhanced loyalty, and, ultimately greater profitability.

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