

THE VALUE OF FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Your front-line employee is the face and voice of your company. — BY JANINE BEDORA

Imagine you are a potential new customer walking into an office or making a first phone call to a business. The company's receptionist greets you promptly in a professional and efficient manner, which is what you expect. Now, imagine that you walk into a different company and the receptionist is too busy, is unprofessional or makes you wait. Which company will earn your business?

The person who greets customers at a company has the power to turn away potentially great business. Take a minute to think about who your "front-line" employees are. How important is that first impression to you?

FACE OF THE COMPANY

A front-line employee is the "face" of your company. This is the first person that customers encounter in your company. In an office setting, this is the secretary or receptionist. In a retail business, this is the sales associate that greets customers. In a restaurant, this is the hostess or cashier. Think about the many times you have

been affected by a first impression. The old cliché "never judge a book by its cover" is relevant here. Your front-line employee is your book cover and having the wrong representative can be more detrimental to your business than you realize.

Many companies give their front-line employees other duties that cause them to neglect incoming customers. Organizing the mail, tracking appointments, letter writing, managing supplies, and basic accounting are often added to their daily tasks. Sometimes the job of answering the phone is given to someone whose chief duty is something else—office managers, executive assistants, and junior employees. These individuals are rarely free to concentrate on the phone or front door. Front-line employees can have other duties, but it needs to be clear that answering the phone or greeting customers is more important than any other duty.

Now we all have direct lines, voice-mail, fax, email, cell phones, and numerous other ways to communicate. As a result, some companies have cut costs

by replacing receptionist positions with an automated answering system. This is unfortunate. This cost-cutting solution could be damaging in the long run as many people appreciate immediate quality customer service and human contact. Just call your credit card company and you will quickly be reminded of how eager you are to speak to a representative.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Front-line employees who are committed to satisfying customer needs and requests often can keep businesses from losing current customers. First of all, with everything from an accounting firm to a restaurant, that front-line employee can build relationships with regular customers. If an issue arises, that person can defuse the situation much easier.

Sometimes that front-line employee can create business just by doing his or her job—answering the phone! For many small businesses, from lawn care to law firms, just the fact that someone answers the phone or is there if they walk in the

door can win you business. If new customers are in immediate need, they won't leave a message. They will just move on to the next company.

Make sure the cover of your company "book" well represents what your business has to offer. Remember that your front-line employee is the first "face" or "voice" of your business. Carefully consider the value of your front-line employees, as they may very well be one of the most significant investments in your company.

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Janine Bedora is president of Personnel Connection, a division of the Spencer Reed Group, LLC. She assists companies in finding qualified candidates to fill positions from administrative to upper management. You can reach her at (913) 327-2860 or Janine.Bedora@personnelconnection.com.