Funny means more Money

by Sam Swaminathan



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Pontificating about customer service just won’t buy profits. Do something about it (and quickly) before the competition clobbers you.

Keynesian economics recommended deficit spending by Government to come out of the Great Depression. The logic went somewhat like this: It would place money in the hands of consumers who would then go out and buy more things. This, in turn, would lead businessmen to hire more workers to cope with the higher demand. Unemployment would then evaporate!

A critical flaw in this theory is that, it focuses on the circulation of money, and ignores the reality that unemployment is no longer a quantitative, but a qualitative problem.

Even if there are 10 times more vacancies than the unemployed, the vacancies cannot be filled successfully unless the population has the skills and the knowledge required for the jobs. Thanks to mass customization, product specialization and changing customer expectations, workers can no longer be interchanged as easily

as in the past.

Today’s workplaces are dominated by non-manufacture activities; add to this a multicultural workforce, and the array of skills required, goes way beyond the mechanical into the domain of the cultural and the interpersonal. Yet companies continue to operate the way work was organized nearly a century ago.

Just look around. The fastest growing sectors are travel, tourism, leisure, health care and the like. Almost every one of these sectors is a high customer-contact business. Corporations in high customer contact business will have to stop treating employees as numbers and start treating them as individuals. The way your employees treat customers depends more than anything else upon the way you treat your employees. Companies will be forced to support-rather than resist in-depth education and training, even job sharing.

This was brought into sharp focus when I walked into a leading sporting goods store the other day, with my son, to buy a tennis racket and some accessories. There were two employees in the store, and we were the only customers. The expression on the salespersons’ faces left no doubt in our minds that we were unwelcome intrusions in their tranquility. Not to be deterred, we ventured forth.

One person was seated behind the cash counter. He was obviously the manager, and his expression barely concealed the fact that he expected the other person his minion to deal with the unexpected incursions.

As it happened, there were a number of Wilson rackets hung high above the cash counter. My son bravely decided to examine them. The manager leapt out of his chair, smiled and brought down five models. Yes? No!

We had to dance and skirt around the “meditating” manager, to reach out for the merchandise. Hoping to get the fellow out of his seat, I politely asked if he was tired. (No it wasn’t closing time, it was 6.30 in the evening!). His reply was an enigmatic shrug of the shoulders, and I wondered whether I ought to burn some incense sticks to acknowledge the phlegmatic presence of the great one. With some fancy footwork and nimble balancing acts, we managed to pull down a couple of rackets from their precarious pegs and conclude our business. By this time, we were feeling guilty as hell for having disturbed these fine fellows.

Neither gentlemen even tried to sell us additional equipment racket grips, tennis

balls, sports- wear all of which were silently staring at us from their spots. Roughly speaking, stock worth US $250,000 was sitting idle, and these two guys just didn’t care!



Another glaring factor was the climate prevailing in the store. The man behind the cash box was the boss; the other fellow was the subordinate, no doubt about it. The mere mortal at least made some feeble efforts to answer our queries. The manager on the other hand, couldn’t be bothered. If such a chasm can exist between two persons working in 400 square feet of space, imagine the environment one might expect in 4000 square feet of this company’s head office space with 20 or 30 employees.

My son was willing to spend as much as 800 Dirhams for a good racket and accessories, in preparation for the tennis season just ahead. The salesmen could have induced us to spend that amount. In the end, we spent half the sum, and were more than relieved to get out of the store.

If the management of that sports store believes that they are only a sports store, not a hi-tech shop, do they know that the Gum King, Wrigley Jr. was ranked no. 6 in ten-year-total-return to investors last year Surely, sporting equipment is more hi-tech than chewing gum!

Heard about the credo of Vermont-based ice cream kings Ben and Jerry: "If something isn't fun, why do it?" The company even has a "Joy Gang" that distributes upto US $500 to units coming up with creative ideas.

By the way, I thought sports for us ordinary folks was supposed to be fun. Why wasn't there the slightest hint of fun inside that store? Is fun banned at work? Heard about the credo of Vermont- based ice cream kings Ben and Jerry: "If something isn't fun, why do it?" The company even has a "Joy Gang" that distributes upto US $500 to units coming up with creative ideas. The philosophy- there's a certain amount of routine. to every job. The joy gang is here to challenge that routine.

Why doesn't that sports store convert one outlet into a fun outlet? Compare its profits with the others after a year. Don't be surprised if you find a new slogan – WE HAVE FUN AND EARN A TON.

Corporations desperately need to increase service productivity and create new-style structures more appropriate to the needs of the times. Survival will demand that they stop treating employees en masse and start thinking of them as individuals, who need training and motivation to perform their tasks. This involves challenging some outworn assumptions such as:

- staff can be replaced by others from Madras or Manila at half the cost.

- training is a waste of money - staff ought not to be trusted - the boss is king, the rest don't matter

The new system of wealth creation threatens long-entrenched power relationship between employers and employees, between superiors and subordinates. The new age workplace needs an over-haul of everything. For sure, we need people with well-developed powers of analysis and assimilation. But are they zany, funny, happy, and cheerful? ***Does your company hire people like the one at the sports store?***