

THE PEOPLE FORMULA FOR A TOP-TIER SHOP

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In my September article, *Winning Workplace*, I wrote about the importance of employee engagement and building an organization that top talent wants to be part of. In this piece, we'll focus further on the people inside your auto service business, specifically how to hire to support a world-class service organization.

START AT THE TOP

Building and sustaining a true world-class service organization always starts at the top. Owners and managers need to be actively involved in serving customers, leading by example, and consistently demonstrating the standards and behaviors they want their team to follow.

Too often leaders take the stance that they have "people for that," when the truth is the most important people are themselves. Everyone in the business is in customer service and plays a part in every customer's experience. Leadership should never be the exception. In a world-class

service organization, the CEO should also be the Chief Experience Officer.

Just as important as how you treat customers is how you treat the team. Managers should model the same level of respect, patience and care with employees that they expect employees to show customers. Average managers skip this step, then wonder why customer interactions fall flat.

J. W. "Bill" Marriott Jr., chairman of Marriott International, put it best: "If you take care of your employees, they will take care of your customers, and your business will take care of itself."

HIRE PEOPLE THAT FIT YOUR "WORLD-CLASS" MODEL

Workplace culture is a major driver of world-class customer service, so it's essential to hire people who fit the model you want to build. The wrong people can drag a business backward. The right people help it rise.

Jim Collins captured this perfectly in *Good to Great* in the chapter titled "First Who... Then What." His research showed that great companies "start

by getting the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus and the right people in the right seats."

Average auto service shops do the opposite. Pressed by a heavy workload and stressed staff, they hire anybody just to plug the gap. That kind of Band-Aid hire might ease the pressure for the moment, but it usually hurts where it matters most: results.

Every employee represents your brand. Your best people are fully engaged, self-motivated, and naturally raise workplace morale and productivity. They do the right things the right way without being micromanaged. As brand ambassadors, they strengthen customer relationships and often bring new customers through the door.

A bad hire does the reverse. They damage morale, slow productivity and put customer relationships at risk. That costs sales, profits and your reputation.

As Collins also wrote, "When in doubt, don't hire — keep looking. If you have the wrong people, it doesn't matter whether you discover the right

direction, you still won't have a great company." If you want to be great, you need the right people on your business bus. That starts with how they get on the bus in the first place: your hiring process.

Consistent with the hiring habits of many of the world's best customer service organizations, here are a couple essentials:

1) HIRE FOR PERSONALITY

Auto service businesses are, at their core, people businesses. To give yourself the best chance at building a

world-class customer experience, you need people with the character and personality to genuinely connect with customers.

So, who are these people? In service businesses, past performance is a strong predictor of future success. Top performers in customer service and sales tend to be outgoing, friendly, articulate, upbeat and carry a steady "can do" attitude. Look at your own highest achievers and you'll likely see these same traits. That should become your template for recruiting.

This "hire for attitude, train for skill" philosophy isn't new. Nordstrom,

Apple, Southwest Airlines and many other customer service leaders have used it as the foundation of their hiring practices for decades.

Can you hire an experienced industry person and try to train the soft skills stuff later? Sure. But you'll probably pour three times the training effort into that individual and still end up behind where you'd be if you hired the right personality from the start.

It all comes back to behavioral modification. You can teach someone the auto service business. Teaching personality is another story. Changing ingrained behaviors is hard, slow and sometimes impossible. You may get them to "okay," but hiring the right personality from day one puts you much further ahead.

And remember, past industry experience has very little to do with future success. I've personally trained many dozens of novice employees with under a year of auto service experience who routinely outperform industry veterans simply because they had the right personality to begin with.

2) HIRE FOR PASSION

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SHOP MANAGEMENT

Passion fuels performance and is one of the core traits of high achievers. World-class companies understand this. Passionate, enthusiastic employees work harder, look for ways to improve and bring energy that lifts the entire team. From a sales standpoint, they also engage customers in a way that dispassionate employees simply do not.

And, let's be honest. When interviewing candidates for your shop, how many times has this happened?

You: "So tell me, John, what attracted you to the auto service industry?"

John: "Oh, I just love alternators, serpentine belts and the smell of brake cleaner in the morning. Ever since I was a kid, I dreamed of spending my days diagnosing misfires!"



Right. Never. And that's perfectly fine. The passion that drives success in this industry isn't about turning wrenches. It's about people. Your strongest employees have a passion for customer service, a passion to serve, a passion to help others. These are the folks who elevate your culture by engaging in the right behaviors and energizing the workplace.

Bringing both recommendations together, Sir Richard Branson summed it up well in his article, "How I Hire: Focus on Personality." He wrote, "If you can find people who are fun, friendly, caring and love helping others you are on to a winner. Personality is the key."

World-class customer service never happens by accident. It is the direct result of leaders who model the right behaviors and hire people who bring the right personality and passion to their work. If you commit to those fundamentals, you won't just build a stronger team, you'll build a business that customers trust, talk about, and return to again and again. ■

An avid auto enthusiast, **Steve Ferrante** literally grew up in and around his family's auto service business in Massachusetts. Today, he is the **CEO and Trainer of Champions of Sale Away LLC**. A true student of his profession, Steve has over 30 years of successful sales, sales management and sales training experience. Specializing in the tire/auto service industry since 2009, Steve has received national acclaim for teaching independent tire and auto service businesses how to improve customer experiences, produce greater sales results, build a "winning team" corporate culture and be the "Top Shop" in their market. To learn more about the Pinnacle Performance program for your team, visit pinnacleperformancetraining.biz. Steve can be reached directly at **603-681-0787** or via e-mail at steve@pinnacleperformancetraining.biz.

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