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Creating brand ambassadors: Investing in employees of the future - by Harry Wheeler

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The hospitality industry, like many other industries in the world today, is constantly looking to adapt to new and evolving customer demands. Like the experiences with our evolving customers, we are seeing similar changing expectations among the hospitality workforce. These new demands have caused major turnover and retention issues within the industry. Some of the leading real and perceived factors to overcome include: a scarce labor pool; long hours and undesirable schedules; low pay; limited decision-making ability; and poor work/life balance options. Just like we continue to modify our designs and offerings to accommodate changing customer expectations, it's critical to take a closer look at how and what we're doing to attract and retain talent.

Hospitality employees have the unique ability to serve as brand ambassadors for our properties; and, have the influence to directly affect both positive and negative experiences among customers. Let's look at some of the ways to create a desirable work environment for hospitality employees, now, and for future generations to come.

Mindset, Influence, and Motivation

According to a recent article published in the International Journal of Hospitality Management, a study was conducted of Australian hospitality management students who are members of Generation Z – our newest generation in the workforce. When asked about working in the hospitality industry, the study found that: “working in a people industry was listed as the most positive attribute; dealing with people was a perceived difficulty in joining the hospitality industry; and the role of family was the most mentioned social group influencing their career choice.”

Among those who participated in the study, the top three positive attitudes about working in the hospitality industry were:

- People industry;
- Interesting/exciting; and
- Fulfilling.

The top three negative attitudes were:

- Long/odd hours;
- Mentally and emotionally exhausting; and
- Rigid.

The top three perceived difficulties were:

- Dealing with people;
- Long/odd hours; and
- Workplace health and safety.

Lastly, the top three groups influencing the decision towards working in the hospitality industry were:

- Family;
- Friends; and
- Alumni.

In a recent study of 289 hotel employees in a white paper titled “An expectancy theory model for hotel employee motivation,” it was found that motivation is important to hotel employees. Those who participated in the study said they “have a sense of accomplishment and feel good when they perform well.” This motivates them to “take more responsibility, making full use of their abilities and accomplishments.” Pay, bonuses, pay increases, and promotions were further listed as employee motivators. When employees “feel a sense of accomplishment about their jobs, they are more motivated to work hard.” This helps us understand that when employees are highly motivated, they will put more effort on the job and enhance their productivity and the quality of their performance.

Management Strategies for the Future Talent Pipeline

According to the research findings, here are some ideas to help aid in mindset, influence, and motivation among hospitality employees. Leverage positive, interesting, and exciting attitudes by encouraging travel opportunities to work across international positions. Offer cross training for opportunities to work across various properties within the same hotel group or different departments. Encourage enhanced career paths and planning by offering opportunities like management training and professional development courses.

Avoid downplaying negative attitudes or difficulties towards or about the industry. Offer training on how to interact with customers successfully and other trainings about the service, job, and brand. Be realistic about pay and remain competitive. Provide opportunities to empower employees to use their critical thinking and decision-making skills.

Encourage employees to recommend family and friends who have the right attitude, experience, and qualifications for similar positions. Consider creating an employee or alumni referral program. Create work/life balance and community involvement programs. Where able, invest in

back-of-the-house employee amenities like lounge areas, showers, gyms, cafes, among others.

When it comes to motivation, provide employees with constant feedback and solutions on how to improve. Provide training so employees can fully use their skills and knowledge. Support, recognize, and reward employees through manager coaching and with formal rewards and recognition programs.

Canopy by Hilton is a great example of a brand exemplifying a focus on its employees. The brand's slogan "Positively Yours" is touted as the brand attitude. Employees are considered "Enthusiasts" who champion the brand and its positive, personal, and caring culture for employees, guests, and the community alike.

An Eye Towards Future Ambassadors

Improved employee mindsets, increased motivation, and understanding what influences them leads to higher employee morale, better brand ambassadors, and lower turnover. Employees are not just workers; every individual is a potential brand ambassador empowered to represent their properties. How employees feel about their role impacts the customer – whether directly or indirectly – creating vast opportunities to improve the customer and employee experience simultaneously. A happy employee leads to a happy customer.

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