



## **Prospective Employees Are Important, but Often Forgotten, Customer Base**

By Jon Picoult

Customer-centric. Customer-focused. These buzzwords are often enlisted to demonstrate a company's commitment to delivering exceptional customer service and consumer experiences in a day and age where pure product competitive differentiation can be fleeting. These terms also can be applied when addressing three distinct customer bases:

- Consumers (existing and prospective clients).
- Intermediaries (distributors and other business partners).
- Employees (when supported or serviced by other internal company staff).

But often lost in the dialogue surrounding customer bases is a key constituency that rarely gets the attention it deserves: prospective employees.

### **Prospective Employee as 'Customers'**

Are the dynamics behind the attraction and retention of external customers really all that different than those driving the attraction and retention of employees? Both parties have certain expectations regarding such customer-focused interactions as communication, responsiveness and courtesy from those who serve them. And both parties' satisfaction is driven by the perceived gap between those expectations and the results actually delivered.

Some might argue that interactions with prospective employees don't deserve "customer-level" attentiveness, given that many prospects will never be hired as company employees. The problem is that first impressions mean a lot and, unless companies have a crystal ball guiding which job candidates should be let through the visitors' entrance or given access to the career opportunities web site, they're going to want to put their best foot forward for each one.

Indeed, it seems that many firms sometimes forget all that is riding on those first few initial interactions between company and job candidate. Obviously, companies want those interactions to be positive, particularly for those candidates they ultimately want to bring to hire but for whom they are competing with other employers.

However, there is even more riding on those initial interactions than just landing the right candidate. For the candidate, those interactions can say much about how a company treats its employees and its customers. Companies that have truly instilled an exceptional service ethic organization-wide don't turn that approach "on and off" at will based on receiving audiences.

Instead they reveal that in all of their interactions, be they with actual clients, employees or job candidates. Conversely, those for whom service excellence is mere slogan demonstrate that through the experience they create for prospective employees, among others.

## **Delivering Exceptional Customer Experiences**

Satisfying, if not impressing, potential job candidates is really no different than similar exercises employed for external consumers. It comes down to a combination of nailing the basics, or fundamental requirements that can't be overlooked, and delivering pleasant surprises, or service that's unique and memorable relative to competitors.

Of course what constitutes "the basics" vs. "the surprises" is debatable. In some industries with a poor historical focus on service, even the basics if done well can actually create quite a differentiating experience for customers and prospects.

Following are some tips to assist companies in zeroing in on and managing some key "moments of truth" within prospective employees' customer experiences.

**Provide a career opportunities web site that is compelling, useful and accessible.** A great deal of job and company research is done through the Internet, and a company's career opportunities web site can often be the place where the first impression is made. To help make that first impression as positive as possible, use the space to present a succinct, compelling story about why the company is the best place for talented people to build a career. Make sure that a "job search" inquiry exists and is functional and easy to use. Post job descriptions that are tailored to external audiences, free of internal acronyms and jargon. Keeping the site updated and accessible is critical.

**Maintain the service focus as candidates move from click to mortar.** Whereas the online candidate experience can be controlled and standardized more easily to deliver positive impressions, achieving the same outcome is more difficult when the interactions move from the web site to real people who inject their own personalities and idiosyncrasies into the mix. Select strong people to handle interactions with job candidates, and provide them with good training and support materials to help ensure a consistent, positive experience for job applicants. In addition, capitalize on the reception area and those who staff it to create an appealing, welcoming "front door" for candidates. Communicate clearly with all parties involved in interviews, making sure they know who is coming and why they are here. And insist that interviewers give their undivided attention to candidates, avoiding distractions from phone calls, e-mails and other interruptions.

**Don't leave prospects hanging.** A cardinal rule in traditional consumer-customer service is to never leave customers hanging; when in doubt, always choose to communicate even if there is no new information to share. That helps manage customers' expectations and ensures as positive an experience as possible, even in the face of prolonged service times.

While there are different sensitivities at play when it comes to interacting with job applicants, there are still plenty of opportunities for companies to improve communications with job candidates and to use that communication to further reinforce their brand to the intended audience. Be it in the form of mailed print or automated electronic application acknowledgement postcards, boilerplate e-mail statuses for key milestones during the selection process, thoughtful final correspondence to those selected or passed over or welcome packages for new hires, these instruments can help demonstrate to candidates what type of company it is and how it treats those with whom it interacts.

**Set up listening posts to verify the applicant experience.** In a classic doctor as patient "aha moment," outplaced managers and executives are often appalled by the absence of basic professional courtesies during their interactions with recruiting professionals. Yet many of these leaders assert that, when they were on the other side of the table, they treated employment candidates much differently and much better. Even if they embraced such an approach

personally, they still likely didn't have the best insight about how other company leaders and HR professionals interacted with applicants during the process. To cover this blind spot, set up multiple listening posts to ensure that the desired candidate experience is being delivered—even when no one else is looking. With some creativity, tools used to accomplish this for consumer interactions (e.g., focus groups, satisfaction surveys, mystery shopping audits) can be applied to the employment arena.

### **New Level of Talent Acquisition**

While prospective employees might not fit the traditional definition of a “customer,” companies can expand their service philosophies to cover this audience. In the war for talent, a candidate's choice between comparable competing offers could be swayed by how classy, professional and efficient each company's recruiting and selection process was.

And even if candidates aren't offered a job, what better outcome than to have them exit the process disappointed yet impressed by how the company handled itself throughout the exercise. That positive impression might even lead rejected applicants to say good things about the company to their friends and family, which despite the circumstances is a powerful statement that can help strengthen the company's brand among other potential employees and customers.

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