

Reader's Digest Association takes time to thank its customers

It's always a good idea to thank customers for their business. Here's how Reader's Digest Association put its customer service staff to work doing just that.

Customer service for The Reader's Digest Association Inc. (RDA) is primarily outsourced, and it has been for several years. The company oversees the work of those external customer care providers, and it does training, audits, and onsite visits. It even supports Customer Service Week activities on the part of its outsourced service reps — funding pizza parties, gifts, and other rewards and events to celebrate the work that these customer service reps do.

But during one recent Customer Service Week, says Suzanne Ronner, vice president of global customer experience for RDA, “We began to think we should use the opportunity to have some sort of event internally to remind everyone here at RDA that the customer is at the forefront of everything we do. So we started planning an event internally for employee engagement and employee awareness of customer care and about our customers in general.”

“We have been trying to do something every year since then, and we try to change it up a little bit every year,” Ronner says. “Last year in our headquarters in Pleasantville, NY, we said, ‘It's all about the customer, so let's thank our customers.’”

Employees were provided with stationary, containing only the com-

pany's letterhead, and asked to write thank you notes to customers. “I didn't really know what to expect,” Ronner says, “but we brought some food into the cafeteria, and we asked employees to spend a couple of hours one day to write notes to customers. And people just loved it.”

Going global with its “thank you”

This year, Ronner says, the company expanded its scope a bit and decided to coordinate a day on which they would do the same thing in RDA offices around the world.

That made the project a little more daunting. The company has about 3,500 employees in offices in countries around the world, some with as few as seven people in them. “But we decided to see what we could do,” Ronner says, “and in February of this year we held what we called Global Thank a Customer Day.”

For the written thank you notes, Ronner asked the RDA editorial staff to prepare a few sample thank you notes for the two different types of customers that it wanted particularly to thank — its newest customers (so the thank you took the form of a welcome), and its most loyal custom-

ers (people who had been ordering or subscribing for a number of years or who had purchased more than a certain dollar amount). Each of RDA's magazine and product divisions provided names and contact information for their customers in each of those categories — being careful, of course, that they didn't include anyone who had ever checked, clicked, or said, “Please don't ever contact me.”

Offices and departments were also told that they could not include coupons or anything else that could be perceived as promotional with

the notes. It was to be a straightforward “thank you,” with no gimmicks or strings attached.

And once again, the company set aside a two-hour period for

employees to write the letters. For many offices, it was the two hours immediately following a global town hall meeting that the company transmits live (or streams somewhat later, depending on the time zone) to its offices every year. “The guidance was that for two hours after you participate in or view the global team meeting, the entire office should shut down and do nothing but write thank you notes,” Ronner says.

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Employees and executives participate

About 70 percent of RDA employees at every level participated in the event. “In fact,” says Ronner, “our CEO was adamant that she wanted the 15 people on her executive committee to participate as well. So for them we set up a phone bank, and we had the executive committee, right here in the cafeteria, calling customers just to thank them for their business.”

Customers were pretty shocked by the calls, Ronner says, but very appreciative. “And we had a few floor walkers — including me — kind of hovering around the executive committee members to help out if the customer came back with a question or a request that they couldn’t handle. And it was really impressive for them to be able to say, ‘Hold on for a second, I will have somebody help you with that right now.’”

The goal was to have each employee write five thank-you notes, and RDA employees worldwide wound up writing close to 35,000 notes — an average of almost 15 notes per employee for the 70 percent

who participated. And those numbers alone suggest to Ronner that the program was a success. “We also got some anecdotal feedback from the phone calls,” she says.

Measuring the impact

Ronner admits that 35,000 thank you notes and a few hundred phone calls to a customer base that numbers over 130 million worldwide is a relatively small percentage, but the company also put a one page or half page thank you note in each of its magazines in the January or February issue.

“In addition, we included thank you notes in all of our newsletters and on all of our websites at around that time, and we greeted everyone with a thank you on our IVR greetings for the week or month surrounding Global Thank a Customer Day,” Ronner says. “We also gave customer service representatives in all of our outsourced call centers special scripting — and of course, this had to be translated into many languages.”

In Ronner’s view, “While perhaps we didn’t really touch too many customers with the hand written thank

you notes, we did everything else we could to reach as many customers worldwide as possible.”

Further, the goal of the program was to have an impact on internal employee awareness and engagement, and there, Ronner is sure, the thank-you effort succeeded. To share the experience internally, “We did a little story for our intranet, and we had webcams going at as many locations as possible,” she says.

“Another positive thing that happened, that I didn’t expect, was that employees lingered in the cafeteria over their thank-you efforts rather than picking up their five names and going back to their desks to do it,” Ronner says. “About 85 percent of the people who participated stayed in the location, sat around tables, met with their colleagues, and wound up coming back up and saying, ‘Could I have five more cards?’ It turned out to be a social networking event with a purpose to it, and we got a lot of positive feedback about that.”

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