

## ***Customer Service Training - Employees Come First (Jul 06)***

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Traditional customer service training programs focus on the customer, but Wingstop Restaurants has found considerable success operating on the premise that keeping the employees happy has a trickle-down effect. Its A.C.E. program, which stands for achieving company excellence, is a multi-tiered approach that sets the tone for the Wingstop customer experience and touches every part of the customer service cycle.

"We're not a full-fledged restaurant," said Mike Sutter, director of training, Wingstop Restaurants, Inc. "About 70 percent of our orders are to go, but we are fresh, made to order. We have 14 minutes on stage with the guest when they come in before their actual order will be ready. For those 14 minutes, we have to be precise to keep that customer entertained."

Wingstop has six employee positions, and each has a study guide complete with pop quizzes, tests and everything an employee will need to become certified in an individual position. "A happy employee is an employee who will continue to go up that scale and continue to make more money at your company, learn more things, etc.," Sutter said. "We make sure they understand that there is a future with us if they want to stay and do the work. You have a path up. We attach pay raises to their ability to get ahead with the company. The more position exams you take, the more exams you pass, the higher your score, the better your earnings on your paycheck. It's an incentive to learn more at Wingstop, and if you have one person who knows all six positions, that's crucial."

Sutter said that many of Wingstop's employees are teenagers with only one or two jobs under their belt. They may have even tried a fast food organization, hated it and are looking for something more conducive to their schedules and their idea of the ideal work environment. The A.C.E. Program makes sure that employees want to stick around and uses more than money as a catalyst for proactive on-the-job improvement. A.C.E. also encourages individuality, creativity and publicly recognizes employees' efforts.

In the Wingstop Hospitality Program, the Wingstop Secret Service methodology touches customers from the moment they enter the restaurant to the time they leave using a mix of non-negotiables and best practices. Non-negotiables include the company's phone script and greeting the customer within three to five seconds of their entry. Best practices deal with how employees choose to greet the customer and service tricks they can do if the opportunity presents itself. "Not many of these 18 and 19 year olds are going to want to sit and juggle in front of a guest to keep them entertained," Sutter explained. "They're going to want to do as little as possible, so we thought we'll kill them with 100 little best practices, instead of impressing them with one big thing.

"A lot of times when people run training programs, they say here it is, you need to do it tomorrow and employees rebel," Sutter said. "They don't do it, or they end up failing at it. We've had a good amount of success because the non-negotiables aren't that hard. They're core beliefs that Wingstop tweaked. The best practices are a little harder, but we leave it optional. They start doing it, and then they see other people doing it, so everybody starts doing it. When employees can actually see other employees doing these little things, the bar is raised because they don't want to be outdone."

Wingstop also implemented use of A.C.E. pins, a public reward system featuring bronze, silver and gold pins employees earn for giving great customer service and then wear on their uniforms. "I think it was a Cambridge University study that said employee recognition in the public eye is worth more than anything else you can do," Sutter said. "We worked off of that, and the idea has really been helpful to us because we're a small company. We don't have limitless pockets. We

have to be more creative. We set up pre-shift meetings even though there's not a lot of need for us to do them. We usually have three or four employees on a shift, but the pre-shift meetings get everybody on the same page of the play book. We can ask specific questions about how everybody's doing and try to personalize as much as possible to let them know that we are all friends, etc. It also gives us the perfect opportunity to tell people how good someone else is doing in front of their peers. This is where we hand out the pins. If you earn a bronze pin we might say, 'Next week you get to write your own schedule,' which is a huge perk for people."

Linking advancement opportunities to training, clearly delineating Wingstop employees' career path and establishing a reward system has had bottom-line impact. "We have an employee who's been with us for 12 years, since the day we opened our first store," Sutter said. "He has been a cook for 12 years. We implemented the A.C.E. and Hospitality programs and this last year he actually promoted up to GM. We've offered him GM a dozen times, and he's always passed on it because he's happy with where he's at. But when he actually saw the rungs on the ladder that he could walk up, that he could test himself to make sure that he's ready, he jumped on board almost immediately. We have more cross training going on now than we ever had, we have people staying longer, our turnover has dropped, and you can see the excitement level on the shifts has grown."

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