

Connected Communities

by Annet King (as seen in Dermascope Magazine)

The most effective businesses today create what I call a "community of value" – based on both touch and technology. It is a cultural evolution which requires integration of left and right brain functions. We are gadget-mad these days, and as a skin therapist or spa owner, it is essential that you be fluent in the language of the next century. But what is even more critical than artificial intelligence with you and your hardware and software is creating emotional intelligence between you and your clients. This E.I. is the basis of customer connectivity, which builds loyalty.

In fact, the technology is the easy part. But this means more than buying the latest tablet; it means understanding it and what it can really do for you. You and your team will need to learn the software inside and out; sometimes this requires weekly trips to the Genius Bar or a paid visit from an expert who can answer questions about platforms, interface and usage. You will need to regularly purchase and install the proper upgrades, which are ongoing. Because now that we have explored not only the moon but now Mars, no business person should ever utter these words again: "Sorry, but our server is down." And the only thing that will carry your business through an inevitable I.T. snafu: strong relationships which have been crafted in low-tech (high touch) as well as high-tech ways.

Cultivating a Positive Professional Culture

A topic I discuss frequently with salon owners is the concept of culture. To provide outstanding customer service requires a strong sense of company culture in your salon or spa. Your vision or mission statement and your "Golden Rules" lay down the foundation regarding how you want clients to be served and treated, and how staff should treat each other. Without your corporate "10 Commandments" or written guidelines, you do not have a foundation on which to build the ultimate client experience. This dictates who you are going to hire, how they behave, your commitment to training, your policies and procedures, right down to when you open your doors and how you answer the phones.

When your company culture is designed around the needs of the client, or what we today call a "humancentric" approach, your business creates an intangible atmosphere and environment that makes clients want to return. It is also the barometer by which you can measure staff performance and say goodbye to them if necessary, when they do not abide by the rules (for example: inconsistent, grumpy, moody, rude, non-team player, disruptive, divisive, etc.). Incidentally, this may not always mean that these are terrible people – it may just mean that they are not a good fit for your particular service culture.

The attitude and body language of your team is like the cultural "Chi" or life-force as it is felt and noticed by every client through all means of communication – physical or virtual. Just one client can hear a bad attitude on the phone or read it in a response on e-mail, and your reputation is damaged. Just like your server and other digital tools, your team attitude must be constantly

upgraded and always turned on! This means clean, pressed, fresh uniform; clean hair nicely pulled back; immaculate and short nails; nice and minimal makeup; minimally visible tattoos and piercings; no distracting, garish, vulgar excess jewelry. In other words: pristine, ready for business, and simply ready to serve. The person's individual identity – also known as the "Look at me!" factor – is downplayed. The cultural message – of attentiveness, being fully present, customer service and transcendent professionalism – takes center stage.

Tell Them to Stand Up Straight!

Your team members are a representation of your brand and culture; they are also the energy pillars of the business. If the pillars are weak, the entire structure you are trying to build will be flimsy and it will fail. We are talking about your business here! A good business starts with great attitude, which is eager to serve and always aims to please.

Team members are most effective when they are on their feet, not sitting. The team must be responsive, agile, alert, present, light on its feet, and mobile like our technology. Think of a high-end hotel. The team does not sit behind their monitors; they stand. They vibrate with energy, ready to help. They are ready to attend the needs to guests – literally ready to step out (I say, jump to it!) from behind their desks into the "live" area where customers enter and interact. Greet them, make eye contact, touch them, call them by name (even if they have just read the name on their monitors, it is okay!) and even take their bags to hand off to the support team.

Use this model as inspiration for your team. Ideally, create a setting where the greeting team members are on their feet when customers walk in. Do not allow your team members to lean against the walls and furniture or sprawl comfortably on the sofa in your waiting room as they await the arrival of a customer. Even if the team member who greets guests does not know the client, train everyone on your team to say the following words, like clockwork: "Good morning [or afternoon], and welcome!" Note the exclamation-point. They need to smile, on cue, when they say the word "Welcome!" And they need to smile on cue when they say it whether face to face or saying it on the phone. The smile literally makes a difference in how it sounds and feels.

Prohibit your team from ever saying the worst: "Hey," or "Hi, can I help you?" or "Hi, guys!" when one or more guests are present. Lead by example. Stand up straight on your own two feet, step forward, lock solid eye contact, extend one or both hands, smile and welcome your customer with a proper greeting. And I must add another bit of advice regarding your pillars: you must be sure that they do not reek of nicotine. For people in a high-touch service profession, where we lean over people, touch their skin and exhale into their faces all day, a cigarette break while on the clock cannot be okay, because the presence of tobacco anywhere in your facility diminishes the message of health and wellness and quality of the customer experience.

Media Monitoring

By now, several aspects of the digital world are a given – a must, which we take for granted – for your service and retail business. You positively must have a simple, sleek, easily navigated website which makes basic information about your business instantly accessible. There now are

basic "boxed sets" sold over the counter as retail consumer products, which contain all of the necessary software for you to create your own website – the latest development of the desktop publishing boom of the 80s. It is no longer necessary to hire a high-priced designer, and there is absolutely no excuse to not make your business fully available online.

You also need to establish and maintain a current Facebook and Twitter page, and you need to use them daily. Ideally, assign someone on the team who has the knack and have this person send out brief, tantalizing messages regarding special treatments, new products, new services, sudden available "grab it now" openings, tips for care, special people visiting, special events, special "thank yous" from customers, etc. Post often and respond to any questions for maximum traction. When a client sends flowers in gratitude for her beautiful wedding day skin, someone gets an amazing new "do," or a staff member gets certified or wins an award, feel free to Instagram a photo of it, pin it on Pinterest, share on Facebook, and get your team to retweet it on Twitter! Likewise, repost praise and kudos from clients daily, along with great ideas from your team.

Social media connectivity may not generate immediate sales, but it is undeniable that these rapidly moving media are the basis of contemporary connectivity – it is the global conversation in which you must participate in order to succeed commercially.

One caveat with our ubiquitous hand-held devices: your team will be tempted to text and tweet while clients are present. In this way, the digital world becomes intrusive, and damages relationships. Establish your own protocol, but this is unacceptable if premium customer care is your priority. Constantly remind your team that they must give their full attention to the client and be fully present in the client experience. No messaging or tweeting while the customer is present. If the team cannot demonstrate impulse-control – compulsively checking and twitching – then all devices get checked at the staff door.

Honor Thy Customer

We must honor our customer in every phase of the skin care experience, beginning with the physical interaction: warm greeting; warm, steady eye contact; skin-on-skin (handshake, soft shoulder squeeze) bonding moment; genuine smile. And no lingering aroma of back-alley smoke breaks. This honoring process continues in how we treat the relationship digitally. The purpose of all tools is to simplify the life of the customer, to consistently create an extraordinary customer experience at every touch-point in the relationship, and therefore to enhance customer loyalty.

As the New Year approaches, make sure that your technology makes it easy for customers to make and change appointments. Build in clocks and calendars that remind the staff to text notifications and confirmations to customers, to encourage advance bookings, and to make follow-up calls after a treatment.

Apart from the day-to-day mechanics of running your business, use your digital fluency to find out more about your customers. The web is, of course, the most powerful survey instrument in human

history. In one or more of your daily posts and tweets, ask about operating hours. Would more customers prefer later hours? Would staying open until 10 p.m. (common in Manhattan) be more valuable to them than being open on Mondays? Use the extraordinary reach of the Internet to reach, reach, reach. Reach out and go beyond what you think you know about consumer behavior. Ask away and reward those who respond with a digital voucher for a 10-minute hand or foot treatment as a way of thanking them. And remember, digital and "widgetal" technologies are positively critical to your success. But the other most essential quality is E.I. – Emotional Intelligence.