

Minimum Wage does not mean Minimum Effort *By Dirk Dusharme - Editor-In-Chief*

Good customer service has nothing to do with how much you make.

Our publisher, Scott Paton, got plenty of e-mail last week in response to his rant against mega-merchandise Wal-Mart (see "Last Word" in our April 2004 issue). Most of the e-mail agreed with his view that Wal-Mart has lost sight of customer service (see "Letters" on page 5 and "Last Word" on page 64 of this issue).

A few readers disagreed, however. Because we're running our salary survey in this issue, one letter in particular caught my attention: "It's a simple case of getting what you pay for. I could get mad at a person at Burger King for messing up my order, but I realize they're working there for minimum wage. Not exactly a rocket scientist!"

There's an underlying sentiment in that statement that says I shouldn't be concerned with the quality of my work if I'm not paid well. Or, even worse, as a consumer, I should expect crappy service from someone getting crappy pay. Well, I don't. I expect good service, all the time. I've had jobs that paid five bucks an hour and jobs that paid 50 bucks an hour (not this one, trust me), and I always strived to do the best job possible. I expect others to do the same.

Laurel Thoennes, Quality Digest's editorial assistant, often gets e-mails from the readers and advertisers whom she deals with on a daily basis, praising her for going out of her way to locate an old article, help change a buyer's guide listing or about a million other things. Laurel isn't exactly in line to buy a Lexus. She gives excellent customer service because she takes pride in her work.

I asked our art director, Caylen Balmain, about his first job flipping burgers. "Did you think about how much you were being paid, and did it affect whether you did a good job or not?"

"Funny," he replied, "I never thought about that before. Now that you ask, I don't think it ever crossed my mind what I was paid. It was my first job, and I wanted to make sure I kept it." Minimum wage and 42,000 burgers later, Caylen now runs our art department.

I believe that pay has little to do with poor performance. The same people who do poor work at minimum wage are going to do poor work at any wage. It's an attitude.

Although the ultimate responsibility for job quality lies with the employee, I think managers also have responsibility to look for ways to motivate employees, to get them excited or at least involved in the workplace. What are your employees' interests? Is there a way to connect their job to those interests through company activities? Is an employee interested in a different type of work at the same company? If so, why not slowly train them in that function? Maybe the employee has personal problems that are dragging him or her down. Does your company have a policy, formal or informal, to get help for employees who are depressed, drug- or alcohol-dependent or in abusive situation? Do you take a personal interest in your employees' well-being? Do you give credit where credit is due?

It's wrong to explain away a grumpy Wal-Mart greeter or messed-up Burger King order on low wages, as if that makes it OK. The way to get better wages is to do a better job than everyone else, to smile at the customer, to so blow the customer away with good service that this person mentions to your manager what great service you gave, instead of writing a put-down that will be seen by a quarter-million magazine and Web readers. Now that, my friend, ain't rocket science.

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