

Make them Smile...and You'll be Smiling Too!

As a specialist in the area of humour in the workplace, I have seen some great examples of how leading companies are using humour as a profit factor in their business.

The first examples are from the airline industry - where the increasing security regimes seem determined to eliminate all the fun out of air travel. Some airlines (SouthWest in the USA, Virgin Blue in Australia are two examples) have a deliberate strategy of introducing humour into their customer interactions. Here are just a few examples of cabin announcements I have heard recently:

- "We will be dimming the cabin lights for take-off. For those of you who want to continue reading, you will notice above your head are two buttons; one with a light symbol and the other with an attendant symbol. Pressing the first one will turn on your reading light. Unfortunately, pressing the other one will not turn on the flight attendant."
- "Smoke detectors have been fitted to the toilets and anyone caught smoking in the toilets will be asked to step outside to finish it."
- "Welcome to Brisbane. Please stay seated until the captain turns off the seat belt sign. Anyone who stands up before then will be asked to stay behind and help us clean the aircraft."

What was the effect of this? Was it just a case of show-off flight attendants? I watched the reactions of other passengers very carefully. In the last example nobody rose from their seats before the seat belt light was extinguished - and I've never seen that before on a flight!

So, as well as reinforcing an image of being young, innovative and friendly, the announcements also caused the passengers to pay attention to what they would usually ignore. On one recent flight, the attendant received a round of applause after his final announcement.

This is a very clever policy. At a time when, because of security requirements, most airline clients will experience some inconvenience, this is giving them a good story to tell at the end of their flight. They say that a dissatisfied customer will tell ten people the bad story; well, they'd tell just as many people a good (especially a funny) story...it's just that most businesses don't give them one to tell.

The second example is from the hospitality industry. I have recently been involved with Australia's largest hotel group, in the launch of a new range of retail outlets.

My role was to help staff understand the new concept - where 'Fun' was one of the distinguishing features of the brand. This would be represented in the advertising: the press ads had an eye-catching photograph (of people enjoying themselves) and a humorous caption. Three or, perhaps, six products are shown in a space that would have previously shown 30-40.

The stores were fitted out with 'fun' signs for the different categories and humorous posters (similar to the ads). I provided training in 'fun strategies' to assist staff discover how they could use appropriate humour to increase customer interaction, establish a friendly atmosphere and create greater brand recognition and customer loyalty.

And it's working. Customers look down at the mat that they walk over as they enter the store and notice it says (in huge letters) 'MAT'. They smile. They walk out with their purchase in a blue plastic bag that says 'Brown Paper Bag'. They remember that there's something different about this place.

The side benefit is that as staff try to find the lighter side in dealing with customers, they communicate better with each other, are more likely to see the 'funny side' in adversity and, generally, enjoy their work more.

Contrary to popular opinion in many management circles, introducing fun into the workplace does not adversely affect productivity. Research has shown that the quantity of work done stays the same; but the quality of work actually increases. It also dramatically improves the ambience of the business, the memorability of the client interactions and the word-of-mouth referrals. At a time when client loyalty has never been more threatened, introducing something that is free and will improve your client retention rate seems almost too good to be true. Introduce humour to your business...and you will be the one smiling.

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