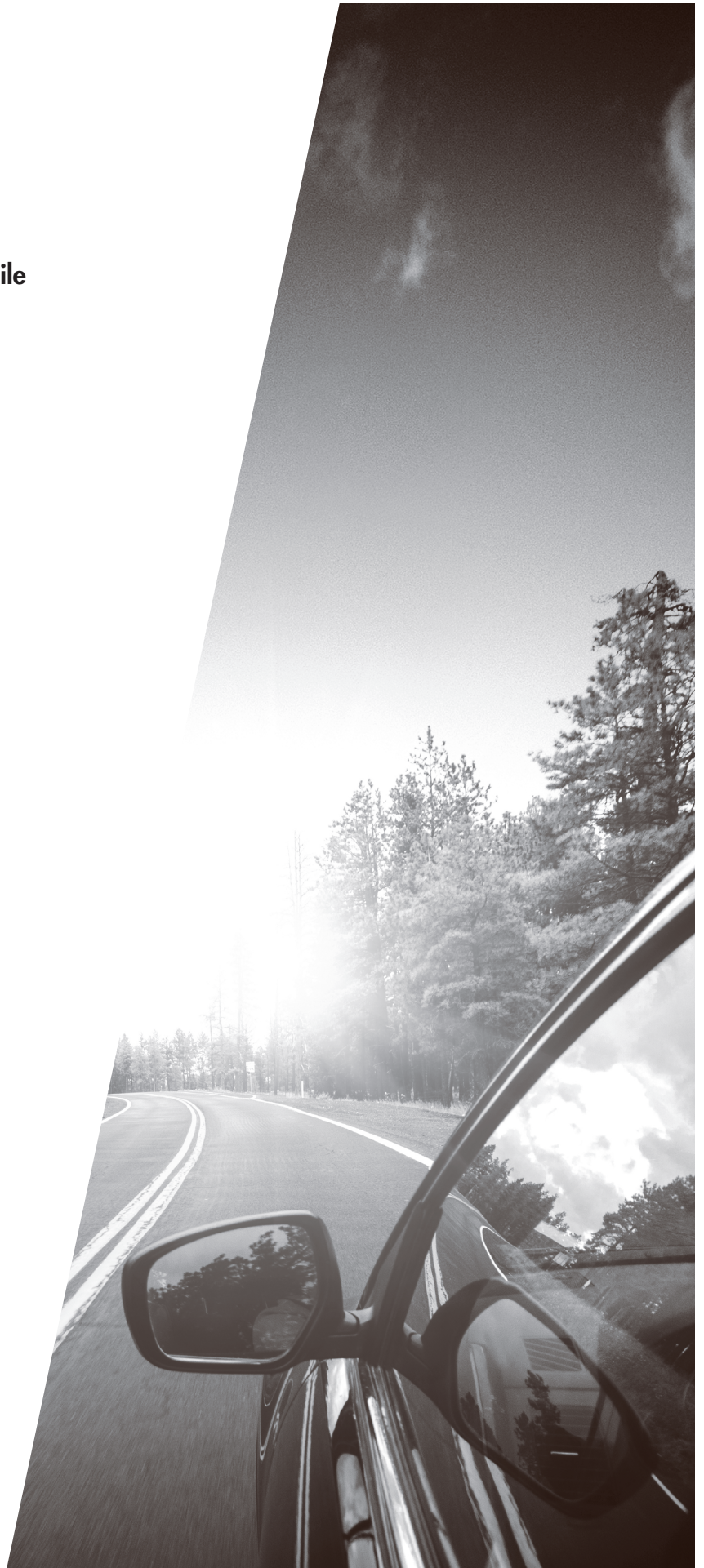
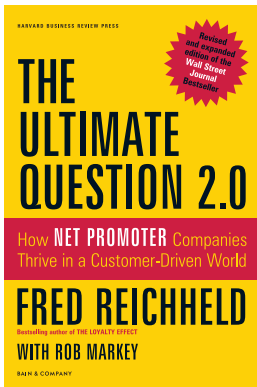


Loyalty Insights

Journey to employee advocacy: The first mile

By Rob Markey



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Imagine heading into your local Target store, as I did recently. It's a busy Saturday morning and you're ready for the crowds. You select what you need and then stand in line at the checkout. But when it's your turn, you get a surprise. The checkout clerk is a young woman who greets you with a smile, looks you in the eye and seems completely delighted to be serving you. She chats, she laughs, she makes sure you got everything you wanted—and yet she somehow moves you through the line with the utmost efficiency. You go out into the parking lot feeling good about your experience. You'll be glad to come back to that store the next time you're out shopping.

How different this is from our usual experience as shoppers! Far too often, sales and checkout clerks at supermarkets, department stores and wherever else we go seem uninterested and lackadaisical. Their manner, their speech and their body language all convey the same message: They're just trying to get through the day. You, the customer, are a hassle—one more person they have to take care of so they can move on to the next. Maybe they tap the credit-card reader impatiently. Maybe they shove your goods into bags as if they can't wait to get you out of there (or, alternatively, bag the goods at a glacial pace). Whatever the specifics, you don't feel good when you leave, and you begin to think about where else you might do your shopping.

Employees in a threatening environment necessarily think first about themselves. Taking care of customers will always be secondary.

What's the difference here? The employee's personality? Inadequate training? Maybe that's sometimes the case. But far more often the problem is organizational. Employees who are sour or unhappy, employees who don't

respond to customers positively, are usually employees who hate their jobs. And they hate their jobs because their company has failed to provide them with the basics, the minimum requirements for employee satisfaction.

In most employees' minds, these basics boil down to four conditions. If you were working on the front lines of an organization, these are the questions you would ask yourself every day.

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1. Is my work environment safe?

Physical safety is paramount. A century ago, more than 20,000 people died each year on the job in the US alone, and many more were injured. We have come a long way since then, but manufacturing and construction sites (to say nothing of hazardous worksites like mines and commercial fishing boats) can still be dangerous.

While parts of the workforce still face physical danger at work, every employee may face issues of emotional safety. People who feel threatened, bullied, humiliated or harassed react much as they do to physical danger. These reactions are powerful. When people fear for their safety, their brains emit chemicals that put them on high alert. Their defense mechanisms are activated. They focus on keeping themselves as safe as possible—on surviving whatever danger they perceive. Employees in a threatening environment necessarily think first about themselves. Taking care of customers will always be secondary.

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Figure 1: Engaging employers deliver a differentiated experience that generates energy, enthusiasm and creativity

Differentiators: Creating promoters



Foundational basics: Eliminating employee pain points

* Safe in both physical and emotional terms
 ** Including resources, training, technology, process, personnel and organizational effectiveness, among other things
 Source: Bain & Company

2. Am I in the right job?

Most of us have been in situations where we have had to stretch, to learn something new. That often works out well. But sometimes employees find themselves in jobs that they will never be suited for. They may lack the hard skills they need—an advanced level of programming, say—and find it difficult or impossible to acquire those skills. They may have personality traits that get in the way of good performance. A person dealing directly with customers, for instance, needs good social and verbal skills and the ability to empathize with what the customer is feeling. An introverted technical analyst who’s great with data may lack the ability to interact well with people, and is unlikely to succeed in such a role.

For people who are in the wrong job, every day is a struggle. They feel like fish out of water. They’re constantly aware that they’re not doing great work, and they may not even know why. The resulting frustra-

tion makes it difficult or impossible to think about a customer’s needs. Why should I care about them when nobody seems to care about me?

3. Do I have what I need to succeed?

No one in an organization succeeds alone. Employees need the training, tools and technologies to do the job well. They need processes that work and support systems that help rather than hinder.

If this condition isn’t met, the effects are grim. As customers, we all feel frustrated when we watch a sales clerk or airline reservation agent stare helplessly at a balky computer. But now put yourself in the employees’ position: No matter how hard they try, they know that something will get in the way of doing their job well. That kind of difficulty breeds acute dissatisfaction. It also leads to a deep cynicism about the company’s commitment to customers.

4. Am I being treated fairly?

Fairness is always hard to define, but people are quick to react when they feel they are being treated unfairly. Consider situations like these:

- **I never hear how I'm doing.** When supervisors never give employees any feedback—or when the feedback they do give is always negative—employees start to get resentful. They wonder why no one seems to notice or appreciate their efforts. Before long, they're apt to figure, *Why bother?* (Or else they start to look for a new job.)
- **Good work has nothing to do with success around here.** Employees generally find it fair when they and their colleagues advance on the basis of merit and effort. They find it distinctly unfair when other criteria—favoritism, office politics and so on—determine advancement or raises. There's little point in going the extra mile when your colleague in the next cubicle will shine because he knows how to curry favor with the boss.
- **I could make a lot more money working for a competitor.** Compensation is always a loaded issue, and sometimes complaints about pay are a smokescreen for other issues. Still, money is one form of appreciation for a job well done. When pay doesn't relate to performance—or when the level of compensation is way out of line with the market—it feels unfair. Employees start worrying about getting their fair share of the pie rather than thinking about how to make the pie bigger.

Make no mistake: Meeting these four conditions sets the baseline for employee *satisfaction*. It doesn't achieve the real goal: employee *advocacy*. But it's a start.

The most successful companies are almost maniacal about identifying weak spots in their organization's foundation—places where employees don't feel safe, believe they're in the wrong job, don't feel they have the tools or support necessary to deliver for customers, or don't feel valued fairly.


When any one of these conditions is broken—let alone more than one—it generates anxiety and anger as well as frustration. The results are all too obvious: low morale, poor collaboration and teamwork, low productivity, high turnover. The situation distracts employees from what really matters: improving customers' lives. Even if they stay on the job, they rarely go the extra mile. Nor do they do what's necessary to earn customers' trust and make them feel good about the experience, the way I felt that day at Target.

Make no mistake: Meeting these four conditions sets the baseline for employee *satisfaction*. It doesn't achieve the real goal: employee *advocacy*. But it's a start. As the psychologist Abraham Maslow famously pointed out, most of us human beings can't focus on higher-level goals until we have met more fundamental objectives, such as safety and security. So it is in the workplace. Unless employees feel that their basic needs are being met, there's little chance that they'll ever develop the enthusiasm, energy and creativity that mark true advocacy.

So it's critical to build a solid foundation before reaching for higher goals. How do loyalty leaders accomplish this? The most successful companies are almost maniacal about identifying weak spots in their organization's foundation—places where employees don't feel safe, believe they're in the wrong job, don't feel they have

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the tools or support necessary to deliver for customers, or don't feel valued fairly. They then turn the company's best resources to shoring up that foundation as quickly and securely as possible, so they can move on to the more meaningful work of earning their employees' deep commitment.

A future article will address how to create the conditions that do create advocacy, a state in which employees consistently go the extra mile for customers. In the meantime, be sure your employees are satisfied because your organization meets the four conditions outlined here. Satisfaction may not be sufficient for advocacy, but it certainly is necessary. 

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