Catering to the Customer

Expert Jeanne Bliss says businesses must operate through their clientele’s point of view.

By Tom Comi

With 25 years of experience working at companies like Microsoft, Lands’ End, Coldwell Banker, Mazda and Allstate, you’d think Jeanne Bliss’ title at her own company would be something lofty like CEO or president.

Instead, the Chicago native and founder of CustomerBliss prefers to be referred to simply as “customer service expert.” In this aptly-named role, Bliss consults with businesses on how they can serve their clients more efficiently by better understanding their perspective.

Her unique perspective is detailed in her latest book—“I Love You More than My Dog: Five Decisions that Drive Extreme Customer Loyalty in Good Times and Bad”—and explains why she has been hired by dozens of companies around the world, including AAA, Yahoo!, Costco, L’Oreal Paris, and Bombardier Aerospace.

We caught up with Bliss to get her insight on how storage operators and vendors alike can alter their philosophy and staff training to provide a more fulfilling customer experience.

SSA Globe: Explain why you started your company and why there is such a demand for a business like yours.

Jeanne Bliss: After leading customer experience for 25 years inside corporations, reporting to the CEO, I wanted to help other brave “customer crusaders” and executive teams create an actionable approach for building their business through customer and employee focus. The world has shifted, and now customers have the world’s largest megaphone in their hand—the Internet. This is creating a wonderful forcing function, driving leaders to want to understand how to unite their operations to cater to the customer experience—from the customer’s point of view—so they can earn their rave.

SSA Globe: In a video on your website, you mention being a “beloved company.” How would you define that and how does a business reach that status?

Bliss: A beloved company is one that grows because they establish an internal environment where employees can make decisions in their business life that are congruent with those they make at home; and where decisions for customer treatment are based on understanding customers’ lives and having clarity about the unique purpose in supporting their lives. This creates a bond, which draws customers to them and keeps employees.

SSA Globe: The storage industry is very competitive, so how does a facility owner or vendor make their customers “immune to the competition,” as you say in your video?

Bliss: By delivering an experience based on customers’ priorities; by investing in priorities that deliver reliability. Think about the emotional buttons that impact a customer when they are considering and using your facility. Then build how you start the relationship, how you craft a contract, how you communicate progress, and how you deliver around easing any fears and boosting confidence. And hire people who can deliver.

For example, for a great spa company, we knew the big emotion we wanted to deliver on was creating “calm.” So we changed the purpose, the operation and how we hired from developing good spa technicians to recruiting and developing “customer escape artists.” Don’t forget that the fundamentals are first about reliability, so start with always being reliable...making explicit promises and keeping them.

SSA Globe: Can you explain to our readers why they should designate a Customer Executive and what that job entails?

Bliss: I don’t believe this is always the answer. In some smaller companies, the CEO should take on this role. But you need someone thinking collectively and uniting the operation from the customers’ point of view. Just having a robust customer service department is not enough. That is reactive problem solving. You need proactive creation of deliberate experiences. And you need to establish cross-company metrics where people are held accountable for experience delivery. This just does not happen naturally when every “silo” is doing its own work. Everyone is working hard separately, but those actions don’t necessarily add up to a consistent and united customer experience.

If you find that your customer experience is fractured and inconsistent depending on where in your company

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your customer interacts, you may need someone or a group of folks to work on uniting these efforts—as many of the world-class companies are doing now. There is much more on this at my blog: ccocoach.com.

SSA Globe: What do you mean when you refer to “understanding the customer perspective,” and how does a business go about doing that?

Bliss: You need to know your customer’s life to serve their life. When you start building your processes, do you start with understanding what motivates customers, or do you build based on cutting costs, being efficient and executing tasks? Start by understanding what customers care about and then build what you do with that in mind. It will set you apart.

SSA Globe: You say companies need to get the customer-first mindset in their DNA. So, what is the secret to doing that?

Bliss: This is a lot of things. My book, “I Love You More than My Dog,” is totally dedicated to answering this question. But a few keys are: be deliberate about what you will and will not be; be clear to your organization and give them good behaviors to model about how you will always treat customers and what you will never do; treat your employees well and train and develop them so you can trust them and honor their decisions; deliver a relevant and reliable experience; be human and hire “memory makers” not just good technical people; and when you make a mistake, repair the emotional connection. Right the wrong; don’t just try to get past the problem.

SSA Globe: What are some of the biggest mistakes businesses make in regard to customer retention?

Bliss: Trying to go too fast, or taking on too much too fast. Working together in a collaborative fashion is a game changer. It requires embedding new competencies and changing how people do work. That can’t be rushed. There are some “quick wins” people can take, but you need to build in a repeatable process for uniting people to work together on building customer experiences. Also, executives, owners, leaders need to stay personally involved. This must be seen by the company as its personal passion. You can’t just assign “customer focus” to someone and then walk away.

For more information on Jeanne Bliss, visit her website at customerbliss.com.