

EMPLOYEES BUILD THE BRAND

BY LEDA KOPACH

In 2006, Comcast was already suffering from low customer-satisfaction ratings when the “Sleepy Tech” video went viral on YouTube. The infamous video depicting a Comcast service technician sleeping on a homeowner’s couch delivered a direct hit to Comcast’s already shaky reputation.



The company was struggling to recover from the backlash of the video when media columnist Bob Garfield launched the website comcastmustdie.com, after his repeated personal challenges with the cable company went unanswered. (Garfield subsequently closed his site in September 2009.)

And at the same time that Comcast’s reputation was declining with the public, more competitors were entering the marketplace. Company executives knew that turning Comcast’s reputation around was critical, and the company’s leadership viewed its employees as its greatest resource.

“Your stakeholders — your employees, customers, investors — can create or destroy value in your company,” explains Elliot Schreiber, Ph.D., (above) executive director of the Center for Corporate Reputation Management at Drexel University’s LeBow College of Business. “Your employees are your lead stakeholders; your customers’ first point of contact. Employees all have to work toward building that reputation. They represent who you want your company to be.”

According to Tina Waters, Comcast’s senior vice president of human performance in national customer operations: “We knew that we had customer service issues. We needed to change how we worked internally to fix those problems, but in order to

do that, we first needed to find out what our customers really thought of us.”

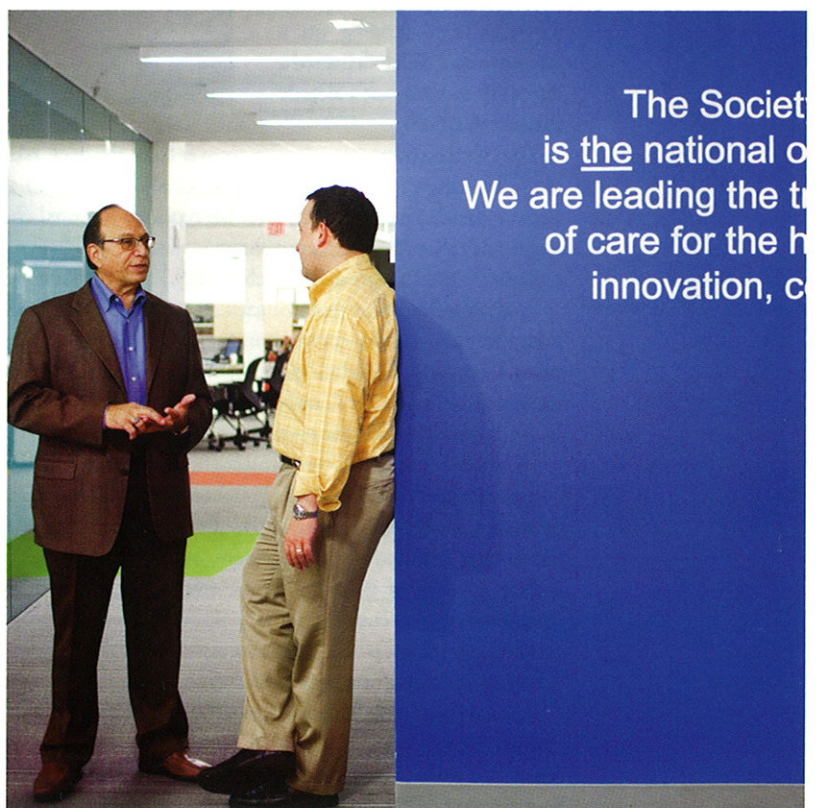
Since understanding consumers’ perceptions of Comcast was the initial step, Waters and her colleagues embarked on a 12-city national “listening tour” in 2008 where they met with both employees and customers, many of whom had experienced problems with Comcast. Facilitated by J.D. Power and Associates, the tour afforded Comcast executives the ability to directly listen to customers’ complaints.

“It was a kick in the gut,” Waters says. “We couldn’t talk; we could only listen to what our customers said. It was frank feedback, and we earned every bit of it. It was all very honest. It’s one thing to study customer satisfaction bar graphs, and it’s another to hear real feedback. We took all of it very seriously.”

Common themes emerged from the tour. Waters and her team were able to categorize and use them to help determine changes the company needed to make. This feedback also served as the foundation for a new customer service policy called the Comcast Customer Guarantee, which empowered client-facing employees to address and solve problems immediately as they arose during service calls.

Since the guarantee offers free services or money back if certain problems arose, such as not fixing a service issue correctly the first time or a missed appointment, Comcast is putting its money where its mouth is.

“From a leadership perspective, the guarantee focuses on the bottom line and puts the customer at the center of everything we do,” Waters explains. “If



we don't get it right with our customers, it costs us money. We needed to embed a commitment to good customer service in our culture and get it right."

The guarantee is backed by a number of significant operational changes at Comcast. For example, training programs were created to teach employees new policies, and supervisory roles were redefined so that lead staff could spend more time working with employees to improve customer service skills. The company also gave its frontline employees new tools — like an automated diagnostic portal for phone agents and handheld devices for technicians — to help them deliver better service. New recognition programs were also developed to reward employees who received high service ratings.

"The guarantee was an enormous step in addressing customer concerns," she adds. "This is a marathon, not a sprint. We're definitely not where we want to be, but we're making progress."

While Comcast is working on rebuilding its reputation, the Society of Hospital Medicine, also in Philadelphia, is more focused on building one. The relatively new association serves hospitalists, the fastest growing specialty in medicine. Hospitalists are physicians who only practice within a hospital setting.

"Our organization is relatively new, so we're actively building our reputation and establishing ourselves," says Todd Von Deak MBA '08, vice president of operations and general manager of the association. "Our entire staff is committed to building our brand. If you look at the most successful brands out there, it's not the one with the big ad campaigns that has the great reputation. It's the one with great one-


on-one experiences that let people know you are authentic. When a company or organization says something and the experience matches up with it, that positive experience is a start in building a strong reputation."

"I'm not sure if a service organization can really look at ROI," Von Deak continues. "Our members view us by determining if they've had a good experience. Can we help them if they need help, do we live up to our talk? And do our programs tie into this whole concept of transforming and revolutionizing healthcare?"

To ensure that all members of the staff shared the same values, Von Deak and the association's senior staff worked with Schreiber, who consults with organizations to develop strategy to build their reputations. Through discussion and various exercises, the staff discovered the core values of the organization, which is essential for any organization to establish its mission and direction. "Having those values in place at the top really helps set the tone for the organizations," Schreiber adds.

While the association is organized into four teams — membership, practice management, quality improvement initiatives, and education and meetings — the teams intersperse once a month to form different interdepartmental groups that discuss issues within the organization's culture.

"This is really a very helpful exercise," Von Deak says. "Different sets of employees get to learn what other teams are doing, yet they are all working toward the common goal with the same core values and the same mission."

"It begins with the top," Schreiber adds. "Employees have to know what the company stands for. It's essential to the organization's reputation." 

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