

Customer Service, the Les Schwab Way

Written by:

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Les Schwab died recently, and I'm going to keep on buying tires from him. Why? Because I know that when I pull into one of his tire stores, the guys in the white shirts will come running. Yeah, running – like my business really matters.

And it doesn't matter to me whether I buy Toyo, BF Goodrich, Michelin, Firestone or Goodyear tires, because I know that if Les sells it he stands behind it, no matter the brand.

The truth is I trust Les Schwab and here's why: I took my old SUV to the dealer for a repair that I thought was out of Les Schwab's range. When I picked up my rig, the dealer told me it was dangerously in need of an expensive front-end rebuild. Since Les Schwab is always my first choice, I scheduled the repair there. Not an hour after I dropped off the car I got a call from the young man responsible for the repair. He told me that the front suspension was just fine. I resisted this good news, but he politely said, "Sir, we want you to be happy, so we'll replace the front suspension if you insist, but I thoroughly inspected it against factory specs and it does not need to be rebuilt." So, I kept my money in my pocket – and told my story to anyone who would listen.

This kind of relationship with the customer is what Les Schwab is all about – but not every company acts that way. A recent Harvard Business Review described how some companies "reward" their best customers with contrived penalties, hidden charges and fees, and subtle incentives, all to extract a few extra dollars in the normal course of business.⁽¹⁾ You know what I'm describing: the early termination fees, the ever-changing grace period, the "free" upgrade that costs \$75.

So here's an idea: the next time someone trying to add another nickel of revenue to the corporate coffers comes up with an idea to extort money from a customer, let's make sure the plan bears their name (or better yet, the CEO's). I'd like to see a wireless company offer the Mary Schwartz two-year contract with early cancellation penalty, or a credit card company offer the Jimmy Ray Jones over-credit-limit penalty with special surcharge if you pay your bill in full every month. Perhaps that would stop this nonsense of treating customers like suckers.

Les Schwab never nickel-and-dimed anyone over extra services: he'll change my flat for free, even if I bought the tire somewhere else, and he won't charge me for a repair that's not needed. And every employee wears the Les Schwab name proudly on his or her shirt.



Maybe there is simply a different ethic when your name is on the door, when you have earned people's trust over 45 years after starting off with a \$3,500 investment in a shed with some retreading equipment and an outhouse in a small, high-desert town in eastern Oregon. Whether I stop into his first store or his 400th, stores that dot the American West, I know I'll experience some of the finest customer service offered anywhere.

Yes, Les Schwab is gone – may he rest in peace – but I'll keep doing business with him, because his legacy of trust lives on and every time I darken his door I feel important, like my business really matters. Would your customers say the same of you?

1. Gail McGovern and Youngme Moon, Companies and the Customers Who Hate Them, Harvard Business Review, June 2007, P. 78



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