

Do-it-yourself done right

Reno author says careful education of consumers a critical element in trend toward self-service

BY JOHN SEELMEYER

The signs of the do-it-yourself consumer movement are everywhere — the self-check-out at the grocer, the store that allows kids to make their own stuffed bears, the self-service kiosks that spits out boarding passes at the airport.

On first glance, the development is mostly about saving costs by shifting work to the consumer.

But a consultant and writer who calls Reno home says companies that learn to manage what he calls “coproduction” are likely to create loyal and satisfied customers.

Peter Honebein, the co-author of “Creating Do-It Yourself Customers: How Great Customer Experiences Build Great Companies,” says the do-it-yourself model long has been around. Think, he says, of buffet restaurants.

But in their just-published book, Honebein and Cammarano say the trend gained new power with the advent of technology that allowed everything from automated tellers to self-service photo labs at drug stores.

Accompanying the technology, they say, has been a cultural shift in which consumers increasingly expect to handle tasks ranging from pumping gas to checking out library books on their own.

Companies that handle the transition successfully, Honebein said over a sandwich at Pinocchio's a few days ago, are those that begin to look at their customers in a new light.

“If you want your customers to do more of the work, you need to think of them as



Honebein

employees,” he said.

That means that do-it-yourself customers need orientation and training — and they need rewards for a job well done.

Researchers have found, Honebein and Cammarano write, that customers who are successful in a self-service environment credit themselves. If the experience goes bad, they blame the company.

So how are customers educated? Southwest Airlines prepared detailed step-by-step directions when it first encouraged customers to book flights on line in the 1990s. A McDonald's restaurant in London, meanwhile, reportedly hired actors to pose as customers who tidied up after themselves when the restaurant wanted to teach patrons to clear their own tables.

The rewards for do-it-yourself customers sometimes are financial — Southwest initially doubled Rapid Rewards miles for customers who booked on line — but many consumers are equally motivated by time savings, Honebein said.

As do-it-yourself experiences expand from the purely transactional — self-service check-out at home improvement stores — consumers see options such as Build-A-Bear Workshops in which they create their own stuffed animals or Nike Id, a Web site where they can create custom apparel.

No matter whether the do-it-yourself function is simple or complex, Honebein and Cammarano write that customers who perform tasks themselves tend to be more satisfied. They return more often and they're less likely to switch to a competitor.

And, of course, this loyalty is accompanied by lower costs for the business as customers take on more of the work.

Do-it-yourself customers, the authors say, range from folks who traditionally have handled projects such as home improvement and investments by themselves to the radicals who entirely rework products. One radical: The buyer of a Lego Mindstorms robot who rewrote the toy's operating system.

The possibilities to create do-it-yourself customers are endless. Honebein, for instance, teaches a marketing class at the University of Nevada, Reno, one night a week between consulting stints at companies around the country. In recent sessions, he's developed successful strategies in which groups of students take a greater role in teaching themselves.

The implications of the do-it-yourself movement have been on Honebein's mind for a

dozen years, and began to crystallize in the mid-1990s when he was writing “Strategies for Effective Customer Education.”

Along the way, he hooked up with Cammarano, a consultant and former chief executive officer for several Inc. 500 companies.

And as they worked together, they watched as the creation of do-it-yourself customers became a key piece of the strategies of some companies. Some such as Build-A-Bear built companies entirely around the philosophy, while others learned they needed to develop the new customer experiences by design rather than default.

“Customer experience is at the forefront of how companies are refining their brands,” Honebein said.

Commemorating Hispanic Heritage Month



You should know:

- Documents You Can Choose for Employment
- I-9 Form Requirements
- How to Protect Yourself at Work
- OSHA Regulations for Your Business

FREE and Confidential HELP is available!

Nevada Small Business Development Center

(702) 866-5985 or (800) 240-7094

Funding provided by: Public Entity Risk Institute, Builders Insurance Company, Office of Special Counsel for Immigration, and U.S. Small Business Administration