

Soft Skills at Work: Integrity is crucial for connecting with customers

By MARCIA HALL, For The Capital
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Last month I went to the Annapolis Seafood Market in Severna Park looking for red snapper. Behind the counter was Dwayne Curtis, who told me he had some snapper in the back.

"Maybe I'll just get some flounder instead," I said.

"You'll like the snapper much better," Dwayne assured me.

He then went into a discussion about the quality of the fish and how it tasted. "I'll go get it and cut it for you," he said.

When he returned, I was treated to a demonstration of how to skin a fish along with many details I never knew. It was clear Dwayne had extensive knowledge about the fish he sells.

Soon he was finished and I asked for a pound. The piece weighed more and sensing that I would like him to trim it, Dwayne accommodated me. He told me to come back and tell him how I liked it.

From that brief interaction, I could see why he has so many devoted customers. It was his integrity. He truly wants his customers to enjoy the fish and inspires trust in his recommendations.

Integrity is a quality all employers want their workers to have. Josh Middleton, manager at the store, described how Dwayne exemplifies this attribute.

"I can count on him," Josh said. "Even when no one is watching or looking, he is always doing the right thing. I never have to question him. If he tells me something, I trust him."

As I experienced, Dwayne is a people person, too.

"He's great with customers and he knows what he's doing," Josh said. "He gives the same customer service regardless of who you are. That's integrity. He has core values and other people see them."

Dwayne has been cutting fish for almost nine years. He is a seafood associate, specializing in the fish department. In addition to learning his craft from a former manager, Dwayne has taken marine biology courses. I found it interesting that he initially wouldn't touch fish but his former manager motivated him and taught him everything he knows.

The general manager for the Severna Park store, Michael Christenson, mentioned that Dwayne goes the extra mile to fulfill customer needs.

"He is an excellent employee and very knowledgeable," Michael said. "If fish is unavailable, he doesn't just say we're out of the fish. He suggests a substitution. He goes further explaining how to prepare the fish."

Dwayne told me he shows customers every last piece of fish and tells them how it tastes, even when it's possible the person might not initially like it.

"I have to be truthful," he said. "I will tell them it has to be an acquired taste."

It is that honesty that brings customers back.

A woman came in looking for a particular fish, which the store didn't have, and Dwayne convinced her to try black bass instead. He told her how to cook it and said to let him know how it was. She returned saying, "That fish is awesome. Do you have any more?"

Dwayne is particularly fond of people visiting the store for the first time.

"We like new customers. New customers are awesome," he said.

He remembered a couple who said they didn't have seafood where they had lived.

"Wow, you guys are missing out," Dwayne told them. "Be sure to come back. They said, 'Dwayne, we will be back.'"

They returned because of the trust they felt, according to Dwayne. He defined having integrity as telling customers what they need to know, and reassuring them that their fish is safe and fresh. At the Annapolis Seafood Market, it is their practice to pass education on to customers.

"If a customer has no knowledge of what they are buying, they won't buy it," Dwayne said.

But it is the compassion for others Dwayne possesses that makes him stand out. Josh told me Dwayne is a person who will be there for you.

"Regardless of his day, he pushes it aside and helps the person to the fullest extent," Josh said. "Everyone has gripes, but his number one concern is the customer."

The qualities of having integrity, such as candor, sincerity and being honorable, were very much on display the day I interacted with Dwayne. It sounds like he demonstrates those characteristics with each fish he sells.

CONNECT! Coalition

Have you seen examples of excellent customer service or a demonstration of attributes you think should be recognized? CONNECT! members are interested in hearing what businesses are doing to promote the importance of soft skills.

Send me your recommendations and why you believe the Anne Arundel County company or person exemplifies those qualities. Selected entries may be included in a future column!

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