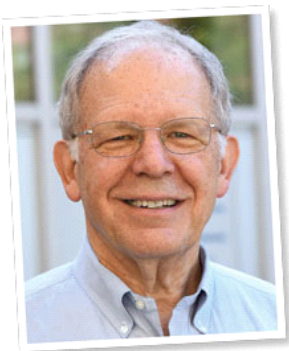


9/1/2023

He Said What?

Bill McCurry



Bill McCurry

My wife and I used to spend a small fortune on bird seed for our backyard. With seed prices increasing, we now spend a large fortune. Like most bird lovers, we enjoy the entertainment they provide with their songs and antics.

When visiting garden centers, I always check out the bird department. Those who heavily invest in birding supplies commonly find bird-feeding customers will seek out their wide product assortment, usually buying other products during their frequent feed-buying trips.

One retailer I visited had a very large bird section. The suet selection was massive. Three shelves, spanning 16 ft., were stacked high. Most suet was displayed in the shipping cartons, usually containing 12 suet cakes. One empty display box was

identified as "Woodpecker suet" and it had the highest price tag of any suet on display.

Nearby a woman was gently complaining to a young salesperson. "This is the third time I've been in. Both other times you said the suet was arriving soon."

The salesperson responded defensively. "Today's the last time you'll talk to me. They don't know it yet, but I got a new job. Nobody listens to me here, so I'm leaving."

The customer was obviously shocked.

The salesperson continued. "The first time you asked about it, I went to the buyer to see if we had some on order. He said there wasn't any on order, nor would he order any because the computer said we had 12 in stock. It was up to me to find it. I searched high and low with no luck. I reported that.

"The next time you came in, we repeated the process. The buyer said he'd look into it. That was two weeks ago. Nothing's been done. The company doesn't listen, so when my friend said I should work with him at the grocery store, I applied and immediately got hired. I start next week. I'll make a few more dollars a month, with discounts on groceries instead of flowers, but my friend says they listen to their employees and care about their customers."

When the lady profusely thanked him, the salesperson went to work with another customer. The store was busy so I couldn't interview the soon-to-be former employee. When Starbucks, Trader Joe's, etc. had employees vote to unionize, the common refrain was: "The company doesn't listen." Sound familiar?

Usually when we hear "the company doesn't listen," we assume the top boss is tone deaf to employee concerns.

This salesperson felt the buyer represented his company's management. Technically, he's right.

The takeaway isn't catering to the whims of every employee every time, but seriously considering input that impacts the company's mission. It's likely the salesperson felt he was being a good employee by reporting the apparent computer inventory error. He assumed the buyer should solve the problem. His conclusion: "Nobody listens to me."

What we don't know is how the buyer feels. Has the buyer voiced concern that the inventory system continually reports product in stock that can't be located? Does he feel ignored? We'll have to come to our own conclusions.

This situation reminds us to relay this story to our own employees, while asking if they feel similar frustrations in their diverse jobs.

The leaders who build the best teams don't hold out false hopes. When asked if the company would consider a dental plan, one boss said, "We know that would be a wonderful thing to have. Unfortunately, we're barely able to continue the basic health plan given rising health care costs and our current profit squeeze. Honestly, it's not likely to happen in the near future, but it's certainly a worthy long-term goal."

Candid, open communication (even if saying "no") that focuses on getting results for customers and the team is the path that can lead to more engaged employees, while fostering even better customer service and sales. **GP**

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 731-8389.