

Views from the Bridge: 3

George Macmillan

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Consumers of goods and services deserve, and indeed demand, a fair deal. This statement is no less valid today than it was in the middle of the nineteenth century when Co-ops were rapidly emerging. Recent statistics from the Office of Fair Trading reveal that over ten million people each year are dissatisfied with a purchase they have made and are prepared to register their complaint in a way that demands that something be done about it. Consumers also make considerable efforts to seek advice and information that will help them to get exactly what they want at a price they are prepared to pay. Consumer Councils and similar organisations are here to stay.

The Pressure of Consumer Choice

The most important consumer pressure, however, is not the formal complaint, but the exercise of choice to shop elsewhere when goods are inferior, or services are inadequate. This power of choice has never been greater in the retail field than it is today. Providers of goods and services are very conscious of this consumer pressure and seek advice from market researchers. This tends to result in the public being offered a similar range of goods, at similar prices, presented in similar store environments and utilising similar methods of merchandising.

Recognition of the difference between one retailer and another in the eyes of today's customers is being increasingly influenced by their perception of the attitude of staff towards them as purchasers. An important factor in achieving the competitive edge today involves identifying and satisfying the needs of customers and gaining and retaining their loyalty. In achieving this successfully it is the attitude of staff towards customers that can make the vital difference.

Cultivating the Staff - Customer Relations

The establishment and maintenance of good customer relations is wholly dependent on the positive attitudes of staff and their willingness to respond to customers' needs. Appropriate employment policies are a major factor in creating the right employee attitude and employers now need more than ever to adopt employment policies and practices designed to create the essential relationship between their staff and their customers. Because of the pressure of competition in retailing, it would be only too easy to be drawn into attitudes that are exploitive of customers by seeing them merely as "till fodder", but by adhering to basic Co-operative principles the Movement can avoid that pitfall and demonstrate "the Co-operative difference".

In the development of the Co-operative relationship between provider and consumer it is likely that Societies will adopt employment policies and practices which are not dissimilar from those of our competitors, especially since these have been increasingly influenced by legislation over the years, but it is interesting to reflect that the reasons for adopting particular employment policies and practices can be based on entirely different motives in each case.

The Co-operative Difference

The primary purpose of private traders is to generate maximum profit to provide rich rewards for distribution amongst a relatively small number of individuals. If their employment policies and practices create an atmosphere in which good customer relations flourish, it is only because this is recognised as an essential element in the pursuit of maximum profits. Co-operative principles are basically concerned with democracy, equality and mutuality and Co-operative societies flourished in furthering these ideals. Historically, while their activities were largely concerned with countering the exploitation of the consumers of their day, it was taken for granted that their philosophy involved these principles to their own employees as well as to the community at large.

The employment policies and practices of a Co-operative society must be influenced by the above general principles and in particular by the somewhat unique relationship that exists between Co-operative members, their society, and its employees. For Co-operative societies, putting the customer first is the constant factor. They exist to care for their customers and even if we were in the Utopian situation of holding a monopoly position, Co-operative customer care should be of the highest standard.

Employment policies for Co-ops must recognise that employees will only develop appropriate attitudes about caring for their customers if they themselves feel that the organisation respects them as individuals. Just as the Rochdale Pioneers introduced a new concept of trading, so societies today must strive to promote employment policies and practices that reflect all that Co-operation implies.

The Practical Conditions

Co-operative employment policies should ensure fair rewards and benefits, a safe working environment, harmonious working relations, equal opportunities, and encouragement to adopt the correct positive attitudes through continuous appraisal, development programmes and promotion to more senior positions through internal recruitment to fill such vacancies. Customer care must be an integral part of all employment practices. As well as carefully planned and enthusiastically presented customer care training to revitalise the basic courtesies, it is also the end

product of a structured approach to recruitment, training and methods of support and discipline that honestly acknowledge the basic right of each individual to be treated with respect.

It is a sad reflection on society in general that good employment practices have to be safeguarded by statute and that people at work have to be trained to be courteous and humane to others, but it is reassuring to bear in mind that Co-operative societies not only survive but thrive in such an environment. "Treating others in the way in which you would like to be treated yourself" is not a new concept to Co-operators but it may be well to remember this maxim when considering employment policies and practices to be adopted within the Movement.

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Willie Tucker

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A mere 20 years ago it would have been considered inconceivable that anyone seeking employment, almost at any level within their "very local" Co-operative Society, would not have previously shared in the ideals and beliefs of Co-operative principles or at least would not have certainly experienced a very quick conversion exercise in those principles. The thought of a "non-Co-operative manager" playing any effective part in the administration of a Co-operative society would have been unthinkable.

The Need for Principles

Principles, aims, rules, doctrines, codes, standards, "mission statements" (whatever they might be) - how can we, or anyone else for that matter, personal or body corporate, exist without them? Has it to be accepted as a sad fact of life that the commercial pressures of competition and the onward march of regionalisation are to go down in history as having robbed us of the very principles and aims upon which we were founded? Are principles and trading successes therefore to become alternatives? Surely not!

The hardliners of course will maintain that these principles are secondary to everything else and in answer to the question "what part should they play in present day employment policies?", they will say "none at all", (or to be kind to them, they might say, "very little".) What matters to them more than anything else is pure commercial success and that we simply survive at any cost. Not *how* or *why* we survive, or indeed what form in our survived state to assume, but simply survival, survival, survival.