

> **TERRY POWER** IS A CONSULTANT AND PRESENTER ON SERVICE AND LEADERSHIP ISSUES. HE IS AUTHOR OF *FOCUSING ON THE INVISIBLE: CREATING A CULTURE OF SERVICE EXCELLENCE* (COMET PUBLISHING, \$33.00 INC GST) CONTACT: TERRY@EXCEDGE.COM.AU: WWW.EXCEDGE.COM.AU



TALES FROM THE KITCHEN

SOME THINGS ARE BEST LEFT UNSAID

STAFF CAN BE WONDERFUL AMBASSADORS FOR THEIR COMPANY, BUT SOME SHOULD NEVER OPEN THEIR MOUTHS. TERRY POWER DRAWS ON A FAWLTY TOWERS RESTAURANT EXPERIENCE TO EXPLAIN THE DANGERS.

Few would deny the public perception of the financial industry is still in need of some polish. The challenge is to lift the profile at every opportunity and staff represent one of the greatest resources for achieving this.

In a recent B+FS article, former National Australia Bank head of communications Haydn Park said: 'Happy and well-informed staff who talk to the community will develop an equally satisfied and well-informed customer base, which in turn drives strong business outcomes.'

Whilst I agree with Park's philosophy, I think it needs to be tempered with a word of caution. It is not enough for staff just to be happy and well-informed in their workplace – although that is a great start. Their remarks also need to be aligned with the banks' preferred image.

We cannot *force* people to do the right thing in this regard; nor should we try. However, we can create an organisational culture which fosters and affirms a positive, personal and professional belief in the company's image.

We fail to do this at our peril. Offhand remarks from front line staff can swiftly undermine years of PR work and countless dollars spent on promotion.

Undoubtedly, joking and chatting with a friendly staff member adds to the customer's experience and should be encouraged. Of importance, though, is what the staff member is communicating. Messages which compromise the company's preferred image are, clearly, a problem.

This carefree chatter is perhaps more common than we care to think. I experienced an amusing example of this recently when dining with some colleagues at a local restaurant.

After seating my colleagues and I, the waitress chatted happily. Nothing substantial, just small talk. This was fine until she revealed what was going on in the kitchen.

'Do you recommend the tandoori chicken?' my colleague asked.

'Oh, I'm not that big on white meat,' she replied. 'But whilst I'm in the kitchen, I do try to have a little nibble of most things.'

Visions of her prodding at the stuffing materialised in my head. Something must have shown on my face, but she obviously misinterpreted it. Leaning closer she whispered: 'Yeah, we try to have a little crazy fun while we're working.'

My imagination, mixed with memories of what friends had told me about their 'kitchen days' was now starting to get the better of me.

You know what teenagers are like. One of my friends who worked in a fast food outlet that shall remain nameless told me they used to play football with the frozen chickens just before they... 'cooked 'em just the way you like it'. Perhaps that is why they tasted so tender.

Another friend told me that they used to stick a foot up the rear end of chickens – one on each foot – and 'roller blade' around the kitchen in them. Skinless chicken?

Needless to say, for me, the chicken was off.

And if this wasn't enough, the waitress' summation completed the restaurant's demise. Bending low over the table in a clandestine voice she whispered, 'If you want my opinion... I think the tandoori chicken smells like it's off.'

I don't go to that restaurant any more.

Experiences such as this leave a lasting impression which customers are keen to share with their friends, often with devastating impact upon the goodwill of the unfortunate business.

Interestingly, some people make it their life's work to destroy the reputation of an organisation, even after having only *one* negative experience.

Clearly, what staff are saying can have a lasting impression on the entire organisation. I have consulted to financial institutions where similar 'misjudgments' have been perpetrated.

One such organisation discovered their receptionist discussing business with waiting clients: 'Yeah, the fees do **look** low, but you should see how much commission our agents make!'

What your employees say about your organisation *does* affect the way your customers think about your organisation. What are your employees saying about yours?

Action steps:

Openly discuss with your staff their opinions of your service, or bring in someone objective to do it for you.

Create a culture which encourages your staff to speak first internally about how things can be improved and are acknowledged for doing so. ■