



Hardware with Heart

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Pop quiz! Finish this tune: "_____ is the place with the helpful hardware folks." If you can fill in the blank in a snap while humming the tune, it could be due to the ubiquitous, catchy marketing campaign, and it could be because the business lives up to its slogan... or both.

Mike Kelley, co-owner of Maple Leaf Ace Hardware in Seattle, Wash., would say, unequivocally, "BOTH." As with many family-owned businesses, Kelley and his wife, co-owner Kathy Stephenson had the opportunity to purchase her family's Ace store in 2005. They were excited to become a second generation Ace retailer due to, as Kelley described it: "The Ace customer-minded principles and values which generate prosperity for all—our family, the employees, our customers and the community."

Hardware is a complex retail business and we are making customers for a lifetime—not for the day," says

Kelley. In fact, Kelley's commitment and belief in the underlying principles is so complete that he took it upon himself (based on his prior retail and HR background) to author an Ace "Language of Service" one-page graphic for his team. (See page 6 of this issue, "Language of Service".) It features 57 words and short phrases that speak to the service philosophy and culture that Ace has followed since its inception in 1924. It is posted in Kelley and Stephenson's Maple Leaf Ace Hardware employee break room as a constant reminder of how all staff are expected to respond in every customer interaction. The "Language of Service" piece is so well done it was circulated through the Ace corporate office and onward to the entire



Mike Kelley doing what Ace does best—walking the talk by being active in the community.

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Ace Hardware retail network as a helpful reminder of what amazing customer service means at Ace. "We aim to give people the right tools and an opportunity to use them well," says Kelley. "This simple graphic makes it easy for associates to be mindful of how we can help make good on our brand promise every day, with each customer."

Ace currently has approximately 75,000 team members world-wide across more than 4,700 locally-owned and operated retail stores. All associates—from part-timers to regular full-time staff—must know the business well and are trained to ensure they have all of the technical knowledge and expected interpersonal skills required to fully amaze every customer, every time.

Jay Heubner, Director of Retail Learning and Development for Ace Hardware Corporation, echoes Kelley's statements—"The role of Ace's corporate retail training function is to support Ace retailers by providing award-winning tools, programs and rich content to help them fulfill our Brand promise with every customer, every time." Ace retailers want and need corporate involvement because, according to Kelley, they provide:

- Excellent distribution
- Goodwill as a focus
- Excellent pricing
- Superior product assortment
- Significant rebates
- Innovation

Heubner says the highest compliment paid Ace is, "When competition works to copy us—we must be doing the right thing with our culture of integrity, trustworthiness and good communication." To sustain this culture for 90 years, Ace not only constantly adapts to customer needs and expectations but to the ever-evolving and challenging competitive landscape. To that end, they have created a 'Helpful 101' program complete with certification and an annual renewal challenge—with stores working hard to retain that designation.

'Helpful 101' is a customer experience training tool loaded with value. It provides, according to Heubner, "A methodology for creating a customer for life. This includes training on asking the right questions and giving the customer exactly what they need, even if they don't know what they want." The training is for every employee in the store, regardless of role, and focuses on who Ace is and what it stands for as a company. Employees are practiced in how to "interview" and care for customers. "The award-winning program is highly engaging, interactive and fun," says Heubner. All Ace local stores have the option to go through this state-of-the-art training and receive coaching online as well as the opportunity to 'practice' on the floor.

At the end of the training, the store associates are only half-way to certification. Heubner says, "They must show they can apply the behavior for seven consecutive days as a team. Amazement is a 'team sport'." Whether the store should be certified is actually up to the customers, who are asked to complete a 3-question survey that takes 30 seconds to answer at in-store kiosks set up for this purpose. Associates ask the customers to participate and the owners can monitor the results and customer comments. There are certain minimum requirements for certification and, annually, the stores will go through a refresher.

So how does 'Helpful 101' and the "Language of Service" play out every day in the Ace stores given that this is retail and, therefore, has a lot of part-time help with some natural turnover among its workforce? It's connected to the culture. Kelley states and Heubner agrees that "...there is no problem that can't be solved by the right people. Better service always equals more profit. Rewarding your customer today brings them back tomorrow."

The modular approach takes a couple of weeks to complete and employee compensation is uninterrupted during training. This voluntary program was released in April 2013 and, thus far, nearly 2,000 stores have signed up to become Helpful 101 Certified with 1,400 meeting the challenge in 2014. Kelly and his staff will be going through the program to enhance their already incredible customer satisfaction ratings because, Heubner says, "all of the concepts in the

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Ace proudly displays its corporate headquarters located in Oak Brook, IL.

course bear repetition. They are great, simple and easy to learn through the packaged course. It reminds people to never take any customer for granted. For some staff it is reinforcement. For others, it's eye-opening. It provides an infrastructure for predictable consistency. And we won't be complacent—every year the bar will be raised with a new level program to be focused on the next goal."

For companies always looking at the bottom-line, Kelley reminds them that the "Culture of service is free. Words and attitudes are free." Stephenson went on to say, "It comes from a position of caring. We are 'hardware with heart.' We genuinely care for one another and want to help, from retail to corporate."

Ace's seven values are not just a 'plaque on the wall' but rather draw people like Mike Kelley to the business and keep him there. The words chosen by Ace President and CEO, John Venhuizen, speak to the most thoughtful of characteristics which all lead to "Winning"—for the employees, the customers, the vendors and the communities with Ace store locations.

Ace Hardware stores have long been involved in their communities because their owners live there too. Heubner states, "We have been helping neighbors

Ace's Seven Values

- Winning
- Love
- Humility
- Excellence
- Integrity
- Teamwork
- Gratitude

since there were neighborhoods. A brand is a promise and at Ace, we want to be 'promise keepers,' fulfilling our Helpful brand promise to amaze every customer, every time. Helpful is our weapon in the world!"

Ace monitors customer satisfaction through the 'Helpful 101' program via follow-ups such as 'mystery shoppers' and customer surveys, which lead to added support for stores as needed. But the most important satisfaction measure is whether customers keep coming in the door. Excellent customer service is

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“I was sent to my local Ace Hardware by my husband who was repairing some plumbing at home. He sent me with the 'part' for which I was to get a replacement. In the door I go holding the 'part' in my hand and praying for one of those 'helpful' people. I didn't even know which direction to head to try and find it on my own. I barely got inside when a young woman approached me with a big smile (but not one that inferred—'oh no—another person who doesn't have a clue!') and asked how she could help. I imparted my very limited information and handed her the part—a huge relief to give it to someone! She guided me to the appropriate section and found the matching part but then she went on to say that if I used another part with a certain sealant, I wouldn't be back in six months to replace the part that was now broken. I called my husband and had her talk with him about the 'what and why'—they agreed. I bought the new part and the sealant, took it home where my husband very handily installed it—1 1/2 years later: no leaks, no new parts! Ace is all about what I need and clearly know that a loyal customer is worth losing a little on unnecessary sales. They have a customer for life!"

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rewarded at the local stores, says Kelley, "by sharing a compliment from a customer with the staff members—putting it on the bulletin board in the break area so that all can continue to appreciate what we are about."

"Ace is the place with the HELPFUL hardware folks." After 90 years, they still aim to amaze every customer, every time. Heubner admits that the competition in the home improvement industry is huge but many customers still want personalized service. They want to park near and walk to a neighborhood store. They want to be greeted by someone ready and capable of helping. Someone who will send you home with what you need. Ace is blessed to be in the business of serving others and proud to have been doing so, one customer at a time, for 90 years and counting. ■

Mike Kelley is the co-owner of Maple Leaf Ace Hardware in Seattle, WA.

Jay Heubner is the Director of Retail Learning and Development for Ace Hardware Corporation in Oak Brook, IL.

Nivi Nagiel is an NCSA Editor.



Ace is proudest of its front line staff who are the "folks" you count on every day.

Ace From the Inside

Jay Heubner is the Director of Learning and Development for Ace Hardware Corporation, one of the most trusted and respected brands in the world. His award-winning team is responsible for equipping Associates in over 4,700 stores in 65 countries to fulfill Ace's "Helpful" brand promise to every customer every time.



The visionary and driving force behind Ace's 'Certified Ace Helpful' retail training curriculum, Jay is credited with leading the charge to develop a customer-centric, "prove it"-type approach to store level brand fulfillment Certification. Stores that have successfully achieved Certification (it's not easy!) are reporting higher sales, transaction counts and employee morale than stores that have not. Jay was recently quoted in a business blog as saying "store staff can't just take the training and sit back. We ask them to get out of the simulator and prove to the world ... that you can come together as a team and amaze every customer that walks through the door, every time." Jay was featured in the new best-selling book *Amaze Every Customer Every Time* by Shep Hyken and has been interviewed by various media outlets and industry experts on the subject of customer engagement.

In his time at Ace, Jay has been called on to lead many different areas of the business including IT Application Development, Call Center Management, Store Operations, Category Management, Business-to-Business, Customer Insights and Retail Innovation/Analytics. An avid St. Louis Cardinals baseball fan, he also enjoys fishing, mushroom hunting and trying to beat his wife Chris in golf.

Ace's Language of Service

Hello! Hey! Hi!	Nice to see you	What can I help you with today?	May I order that for you?	Glad you came in today	Please	May I take that up front for you?
Good morning. Good Afternoon. Good Evening. Good Day.	Tell me about your project.	We have just the thing to make that easier.	"No problem" Glad to help	"No problem" You are welcome	"No problem" My pleasure	Let me use my radio — pardon me
Thanks for shopping here today	We have several options	Keep the receipt & return what you don't need	How can I improve your day?	How many would you like — two? Three?	How may I help?	I understand
How can I make it better?	What are you trying to do?	What can I help you locate?	Yes	"Ace Hardware and Paint — this is _____"	What does it look like now?	Holler if we can help
"Let me check — may I put you on hold a moment?"	Of course — follow me over here		We should have more on Tuesday — let me hold a couple for you	What are you working on?		Another thing that works well is _____
We're open 'til 7 if you think of anything else	Is there someone you could call to check the size to save you another trip?	Let me get someone to help who knows more	Here — try it yourself	Let me help you out with that	Do you have a photo on your phone?	Yes we do — let me show you
Anything else on your list?	What else may I help you with?	Thank you				
Here is my card and the item #, call me if you have any more questions		Thanks for bringing that to my attention				
If you would like to buy six there is a savings	What's on your list today?	Here — let's open it so you can see				
Is this what you had in mind?	Thank you for your business	Hope to see you again soon	Let me get you a basket...	Will this work for you?	If I were you I would...	How will you be using this?