**Avis and a culture of “We try harder”**

**Key Learning Points**

* “We try harder” was a marketing slogan that became a call to arms for front-line managers and employees to take ownership of customer service, with solutions to common problems being driven from proactive contributions from the front-line
* An example is shown in this case of a local Operations Manager going beyond the call of duty when dealing with a customer complaint, providing a role model to employees and reinforcing Avis’ commitment to the customer
* Empowerment is not enough for superior service alone, as Avis’ managers use systems and metrics to measure performance and ensure employees have the information they need to “try harder”

**From Marketing Campaign to Internal Call to Arms**

In 1962, followed by 15 years of continuous financial losses, new Avis President, Robert Townsend, looked at a number of ways to turn around the failing rental car business. One way was to bring on a new advertising firm. However with Avis’ limited budget, they could only offer 20% of the size of their competitors’ budget. The advertising firm offered to take on Avis on this limited budget, if Avis gave them 90 days of access to learn everything they could about the company and see what their difference was. However after 90 days the advertising firm could not find a single positive differentiating factor between Avis and their competitors. The only thing that they could find that was positive about Avis was that their employees seemed to try harder. And so the advertising slogan “We try harder” was born.

The famous marketing slogan not only attracted new customers to Avis to see if the advertisements were true, but it served as a rallying call for employees, turning a group of average employees into star performers and inspiring people to deliver new heights of service. In just one year, the campaign literally changed the fortunes of the Company. Prior to the campaign, Avis had just $34 million in revenue and losses of $3.2 million. One year later, revenues had jumped to $38 million and Avis turned a profit of $1.2 million. Three years after running the campaign Avis had tripled their market share, and this “We try harder” mentality has been a driving force behind Avis’ impressive growth, in its history growing from a single-airport 3 car rental service to having 5200 locations across 165 countries.

**Taking Ownership of Customer Service**

“We try harder” was a strategy of customer retention through enabling employees to have ownership of customer service, and managers play a key role in empowering employees to deliver this great service. Avis understood that empowerment did not only mean devolving responsibility to lower levels of the organisation, but sustainable empowerment meant aligning key organizational and management processes to create the environment that enables and encourages employees to take ownership of customer service. Consider Avis’ stated management philosophy which is:

Our management philosophy is one of decentralisation and local autonomy, underpinned by strong support services and leadership provided from Group Headquarters, an approach which stimulates entrepreneurialism whilst promoting consistency of image, service levels and operational efficiency.

**Solutions from the Front-line**

In order to ensure this type of autonomy, it was crucial to Avis’ success to ensure front-line managers and employees had the skills and competencies necessary to provide exceptional customer service beyond what customers would experience somewhere else. Avis realised that the training department could not design this, but the crucial role was played by front-line managers who were closest to customer and front-line staff and understood what was really needed. This led to the development of the successful Rental Sales Agent Development Programme.

This theme of finding solutions on the front line also led to giving greater responsibility to front-line managers and staff to find solutions. Where some companies worry about devolving decision making responsibility, Avis found that if managers give problems to front-line staff to deal with instead of the managers themselves, employees would come up with faster, more effective and more cost-efficient solutions to these problems. Avis institutionalised the process of generating these ideas with their practical ideas, profitable solutions (PIPS) program. In Avis’ decentralized environment this program, together with a common vision of the company beliefs and values, actively tapped the creativity and enthusiasm of everyone, and encouraged and motivated employees to take ownership of customer service. A far more powerful motivational force than any reward processes was Avis’ belief that “our people can do it”, and are “trusted to do it”.

**An Example of “We try harder”**

As an example of the Avis’ “We try harder” mentality, consider the following example. Andy Beal, CEO of Trackur, a leader in social media monitoring tools, blogged about his experience with Avis. Although more expensive to rent through Avis, he and his wife had good experiences in the past with Avis’ cleanliness and found the extra money worth it. However part way through their journey they discovered their car was infested with ants which came out from all over the car including the glove box and air vents. They did not return the car at the time, but informed Avis of the ants issue upon returning the car.

Avis’ approach of trying harder started from this point. The rental agent receiving the car was extremely apologetic and provided them a discount on their rental while telling them to call immediately if they ever had problems in the future. Already satisfied with that, Andy Beal was further surprised to find that in response to his survey, he received a personalised email from the Operations Manager apologising again for the standard of cleanliness, expressing a willingness to ensure something like that never happened again, offering a gift certificate for their next rental with Avis, and providing personal contact details should they ever have an issue with an Avis rental again. And even more impressive is that Avis apologised again (although in a more automated response) and offered further deals as a token of their apology. Many companies would consider the standard automated response sufficient as a form of apology, but Avis went the extra mile with not only the rental agent, but also the Operations Manager taking a personal interest in ensuring the company was consistent with their “We try harder” mentality.

**The Systems to Deliver Superior Service**

Managers played a crucial role in not just empowering alone, but making sure systems were put in place and managed that encouraged this empowerment, including making employees aware of measurements related to customer service. Avis’ put in place extensive measurement systems, so that managers had the information to utilise and drive improvements with front-line staff. These included a customer satisfaction tracking system, a root cause analysis system to find the underlying source of any problems, and a complainant satisfaction survey to see how they dealt with complaints once they arose. All these systems were set up based on Avis’ understanding that measuring customer satisfaction is just as important as bottom line measurements, and so they could reward behaviour connected to quality service.

**Managers at Avis**

When you consider the case study of Avis you can see multiple areas where managers play a crucial role. In everything from their training program design to their practical ideas, profitable solutions program, it is managers with an understanding of the front-line reality and challenges that helped make the high level “We try harder” a reality. And equipped with the tools and data concerning customer service delivery, they are able to work with front-line employees to drive even better performance. Furthermore managers make a difference when they lead by example, like the Operations Manager in the Andy Beal example, who by acting consistently with the “We try harder” mentality not only sent a clear message the customer but also provided a great leadership example to his own employees.

Although in 2012 Avis dropped its marketing tagline of “We try harder” its effectiveness over 50 years is something to be marvelled over. It was not only a great marketing message, but a clear message to employees throughout the organisation on the type of customer service Avis provides.

**Questions for Reflection:**

1. What did Avis do to capture the perspectives of the front-line? What role difference do you think these managers made? How do you share the lessons who learn in your own role and how could you do so more effectively?
2. The actions of the Operations Manager towards the customer demonstrated Avis' key message of "We try harder" to both the customer and provides a role model for their employees. As a manager how do you reinforce key messages through your own actions and how can you do so more effectively?
3. Avis understood that data was essential to take action in implementing improvements. What data do you utilise to drive improvement in your area? Is there any more information you could source and use to make a difference?

**Sources and Further Reading:**

1. Avis – where employees take ownership of customer service: <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/journals.htm?articleid=842530&show=abstract>
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3. Avis: We try harder. A classic case of 'repositioning' the market leader: <http://www.grabinerhall.com/press-detail.php?a=17>
4. Avis tried harder to maintain a great reputation: <http://www.trackur.com/avis-tries-harder-reputation-management>
5. We try harder history: <http://www.avis.com.cy/We_try_harder.html>