

Successful companies respond to challenges with agility

By Nicholas F. Horney, Ph.D

A successful company in the age of instant communication and immediate gratification, must be agile. That means, according to writer Gary Hamel in The Wall Street Journal, being “proactive in responding to customer needs.” Agility, Hamel writes, results “in higher levels of customer loyalty and better margins.”

Earlier this year, I witnessed on the local level a perfect example of a company practicing agility. The company is Rice Toyota, dealing with Toyota’s January 16 recall of 2.3 million vehicles.

The dealership had sold about 12,000 vehicles affected by the recall, said Mary Rice, granddaughter of the late Garson Rice, Sr., who started the business.

Shortly after the recall was announced, Rice Toyota sent e-mail to all of its sales customers informing them

of the recall and the remedy offered by Toyota.

Moreover, Rice salespeople answered questions by telephone, informed walk-ins and spoke with customers whose vehicles were in for service.

Employees came in on their days off, skipped lunch and stayed late to address customer concerns. Daily staff education updates were provided to keep all employees informed as to the fixes for specific models. On February 7, Rice Toyota placed a full-page ad in the News & Record to ensure customers that safety was their primary concern. The ad also sought to build customer confidence in the Toyota brand.

Demonstrating agility by anticipating change and taking action to generate customer confidence, Rice Toyota saw a 1,500 percent increase in customer communications via its blog.

Fans of Rice Toyota’s Facebook page responded positively, bumping “Post Quality” to five out of five stars.

Post Quality is a Face-



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book measuring tool that measures how engaged Facebook users have been to posts over a rolling seven-day window.

Why is agility so relevant to a company? Carl Sewell, a leading Cadillac and Lexus dealer and author of “Customers for Life,” calculates that the amount of revenue an auto dealer can realize by keeping a customer for life is \$332,000.

Successful organizations demonstrate agility, not through random mutation, but through purposeful strategies and responsiveness to unpredictable marketplace demands.

Here are five key actions to becoming more agile.

Anticipate change

Read business information sources such as The Wall Street Journal, subscribe to Google daily updates on key areas important to your business, and ask yourself how trends in the business world may impact

your business.

Ask customers, suppliers and employees to share information about shifts they see in business trends.

Generate confidence

Share your strategy. Partner with employees, suppliers and customers to implement it.

Ensure that all employees understand your vision and how they can contribute to it through their day-to-day work.

Invest in training that will help employees contribute to achieving goals.

Initiate action

Build a business culture that values a sense of urgency in anticipating customer needs. Respond to customer requests, and introduce new products and services to the marketplace faster than your competition.

Don’t wait until a customer complains. Actively seek information from customers about the service they received, whether they will purchase from you again, and whether they will refer you to their friends and colleagues.

Liberate thinking

Create a climate for fresh solutions by empowering, encouraging and teaching employees to be innovative. This is especially important regarding shifts they observe in the marketplace.

Actively encourage and listen to all employees’ suggestions on how to improve the business. Implement some of the new ideas and recognize those who suggested them.

Evaluate results

Share your business scorecard frequently with employees. Let them know how their ability to anticipate and respond to marketplace conditions are reflected in business results. Coach your employees on what it will take to sustain success and continuously improve.

Remember: Become agile by being focused, fast and flexible.

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ond nature for many companies, small and large.

Public spaces benefit as well. Greensboro has enjoyed examples of public art for decades, but lately there’s been an explosion of public art. GMA in 2006 made a gift to the city to mark the organization’s 100th anniversary. The massive portrait of General Nathaniel Greene is affixed to the city parking deck on Davie Street and overlooks Center City Park.

More recently, the Coffee Cup Collaborative mounted eight sculptures to celebrate the city’s unique role in the Civil Rights movement. A walking tour through downtown takes in seven of the coffee cup sculptures; the eighth is at the Greensboro Coliseum Complex.

Whether in a public place, a business lobby or a hospital corridor, art provides intangible benefits that contribute to the bottom line, Quaintance says.

“Why build gardens? Why plant a tree? People respond to beauty,” he says. “It’s all about making your business stronger. The real turbocharge is that people respond favorably, and it gives you a competitive advantage.”



Conductor Liz Doebler leads the Greensboro Symphony Guild Women’s Chorus in a performance at Moses Cone Regional Cancer Center.



‘Cup of Freedom,’ by Charles Jenkins, sits outside the International Civil Rights Center & Museum.

Left: Gen. Greene on the Davie Street Parking Deck, a gift to the city from GMA.