

Volvo Taps into Heritage and Service to Boost Customer Satisfaction and Employee Retention

SUMMARY

Volvo automotive company was experiencing a brand identity crisis following its acquisition by The Ford Motor Company. Inconsistency with training for Volvo employees between the United States and the United Kingdom motivated Volvo Car UK Limited executives to take action. Working with *Disney Institute*, Volvo's UK leaders attended programs at the *Walt Disney World*® Resort in Lake Buena Vista, Fla. before bringing *Disney Institute* consultants to the U.K. to work directly with Volvo frontline operations. By developing new hiring techniques, communicating their company's heritage to employees and benchmarking Disney quality service practices, Volvo Car UK Limited has been able to increase employee retention and boost overall morale.

FULL STORY

Volvo has been, for more than 80 years, producing automobiles with strong character and an unwavering commitment to quality and safety.

But the same consistency wasn't always apparent in Volvo's training of its employees in the United Kingdom. Although skilled at selling and servicing their product, U.K. employees had been given little training in the history and character of the company, hindering them from having a deeper sense of pride and commitment to customer service.

"Volvo has a very strong heritage, particularly in the areas of safety, quality, environmental concerns, and in respecting employees," explained Kevin Meeks, Network and Business Development Director for Volvo Car UK Limited. "But where we fell short was conveying to the people who worked for Volvo exactly what the company was all about. "For some reason, we expected employees to come to us with that knowledge," Meeks continued. "We didn't appreciate the need to publicize it internally."

After Volvo, Jaguar and Land Rover were all purchased by the Ford Motor Company in 1999, this unintended 'silent treatment' was put into perspective. Volvo had a close view of its former competitors after all were brought under the Ford umbrella. What Volvo saw were companies

that leveraged heritage and strong employee induction programs which instilled a sense of pride among employees and positively impacted customer service. The good news for Volvo: Change was on the way, sparked by an initial encounter with *Disney Institute*.

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Automobile Detailing

While attending *Disney Institute* leadership programs, Russell Holloway, Customer Satisfaction and Quality Manager at Volvo Car UK Limited, was impressed with the integration between task and purpose. He learned that every Cast Member at Disney Destinations around the world plays a role not just in doing his or her job, but in advancing the overall mission of the organization. Holloway

was also impressed with celebrated stories of Disney Cast Members who went the extra distance to improve the guest experience, prompting him to recommend *Disney Institute* to Meeks. "It was all about taking pride in the finished product," said Meeks. "It was decided that if we could adapt these lessons into our culture, it would inspire the leaders of both the Volvo UK business and the Volvo dealer network."

After contacting *Disney Institute*, Volvo UK welcomed facilitators Chris Caracci and Debbie Zmorski to Manchester. It was an eye-opening experience for many of the leaders. "At the start, we didn't realize there was a problem since the motor industry tends to be quite insular,"

Meeks said. “But as we went through the programs we very quickly understood that this was an opportunity for us. Like Jaguar and Land Rover, we were quickly brought into the same mindset of connecting with our heritage.”

During a series of one- and two-day programs, Caracci and Zmorenski incorporated recognition of Volvo’s history as they helped frame a personalized customer service theme for Volvo’s administrative, service, sales, and manufacturing teams.

Throughout the programs, the facilitators were always careful to let their audience find their own way. “If you come in and tell someone that you have all the answers, they’ll shut you off like a radio,” Caracci explained. “We were not telling them what to do. We simply asked them to listen and keep an open mind, so by the time we had completed our presentations, they would likely find valuable pieces of information that would benefit their organization.”

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Cultural Crossroads

From these sessions came the creation of a service delivery system dubbed Volvo P.R.I.D.E., an acronym emphasizing new service standards based on passion, respect, integrity, drive and energy. But before they could distribute and disseminate the P.R.I.D.E. message throughout the dealerships, leaders had to rethink deep-rooted cultural traditions in training new employees. Volvo taps into heritage and service to boost guest satisfaction and employee retention. When you can channel employee performance, you can use that to optimize customer behavior and responses. This was a leap Volvo had to make.

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“It seemed to us that the biggest challenge was bridging cultural gaps,” explained Caracci. “In the U.K., the prevailing attitude was ‘I pay you to perform a function and you will do it.’ The focus was finding someone who would perform

a certain task as opposed to hiring an employee who had the right attitude.”

Caracci and Zmorenski also had to emphasize to their audience that while certain ideas were introduced and perfected by Americans for an American culture, they contained universal truths that transcend borders. “Occasionally the attitude of an international audience is to shrug and say, ‘That’s an American idea, and I won’t listen to it,’” commented Caracci. “Our goal is to have people be open—to say ‘I’ll listen for the ideas that are applicable to us and that can be adapted into my business culture.’”

That’s what happened at Volvo UK. The leaders heard the message, and employees who were once being hired solely for their skills were now reviewed for their willingness to be part of the team. “When you hire someone based on attitude over aptitude, you get more bang for your buck,” Caracci pointed out. “When you can channel employee performance, you can use that to optimize customer behavior and responses.

This was a leap Volvo had to make. When they did, they started to see the results.” As the company began hiring for attitude, Volvo UK also started to address an oft-forgotten segment of its workforce: dealers. “We have a network of dealers throughout the country, so we modified a program specifically for them called ‘Do it with P.R.I.D.E.’,” noted Meeks. “People who had worked with us for years—administrators, accountants, drivers, valeters—these are some of the people who make this business work, but it turns out that we had ignored them up until then. ‘Do it with P.R.I.D.E.’ helped us further leverage the service theme and make it actionable by everyone in dealerships.”

Volvo UK was now realizing the strength that came with focusing on service and having everyone involved in exceeding customer expectations. Backed by this newfound enthusiasm, Volvo leaders wanted to recognize individuals who were going the extra mile. They surprised 32 top service winners with a trip to the *Walt Disney World*® Resort,

where they could see Disney Cast Members first-hand, demonstrating best practices in service, management, quality and leadership. “It was absolutely superb,” Meeks said. “There was such a positive reaction watching how Cast Members worked with Guests that when the attendees returned to their dealerships, word started spreading about new ways we could treat our own customers. It was all part of the process of adapting what had been practiced by Disney so we could do a better job.”

A Steady Drive

Having a fortunate few see Disney customer service philosophies in action was a small part of a larger effort that included employees participating in an introductory program to learn about Volvo’s heritage and its values. This continues today, and the success of Volvo UK’s relationship with *Disney Institute* is mirrored by reduction in turnover, a new approach in how customers are treated, and a newfound pride displayed by the employees of the company.

“I think every organization has a purpose that is bigger than the product it creates,” Meeks said. “That’s because every company produces an experience as well as a product. To get the best out of people, employees have to feel that they are more than a cog in the wheel, that they are creating something useful and worthwhile—something that makes the whole more than the sum of its parts.

“When any company can say that, there’s the reason to inspire the staff to work together and deliver what the company’s philosophy is all about.” Now that *Disney Institute* practices have been adapted and woven into its new corporate culture, Volvo UK has found the training provides unexpected benefits during uncertain times.

“The current economic environment is tough,” Meeks commented. “But if we hadn’t done the work with Volvo P.R.I.D.E., we would have found it much more difficult to keep people motivated and boost their morale.

“When it mattered, *Disney Institute* really delivered.”