

A case of blind determination that paid off

Pam Kershaw

Buying an ailing small business is not for the faint-hearted. While the purchase price, potential for building market share and profit projections may be favourable, reforming a negative company culture can present a considerable challenge.

When Tony Cassar and Gino Venegas bought Victory Blinds in 1993, the company had changed ownership three times in six years, was in a parlous financial state and had bred a culture of insecurity and distrust.

Such was the level of hostility and suspicion towards yet another owner that when Cassar introduced a customer-focused philosophy and asked staff to wear name tags, some threatened to quit.

Today, the Victory Blinds service technicians not only wear a photo-identity name tag and uniform, but when they arrive to install blinds in a home they take off their boots, put on corporate slippers and white gloves, spread out drop-sheets and clean up afterwards with their own vacuum cleaner.

Sales consultants, who once

crammed in up to 14 appointments a day and slashed prices to sell an inferior product, are now trained to advise on interior decor, and achieve higher sales figures from fewer appointments.

The company has gone from a turnover of \$3 million in 1993 to a projected turnover of \$17 million to \$18 million this year. It has won an Australian Achievers Award for Customer Service and will shortly attain ISO9002 quality accreditation.

Cassar admits it has taken patience and persistence.

Trying to get tradespeople to change their culture completely is not an easy thing to do, he says.

"The name tag issue arose early in the piece. We actually had people threatening to leave. That was the culture. But these people are still with us today, because they now see the importance of this when they are in the customer's home.

"They realise that to bring success in a large way, you have to do the small things right first."

Cassar commissioned a mystery shopping survey to gain external feedback on service



Tony Cassar . . . "We had people threatening to leave." Photo: Andrew De La Rue

areas needing improvement. The exercise was not a witch-hunt, as staff knew of the survey and were not identified by name in the results.

Feedback showed many staff did not introduce themselves to customers, sales consultants

were not trained to identify a customer's real needs and there was little recognition among consultants or technicians of the importance of respecting customers' homes.

Cassar focused on creating good internal relationships (he

and Venegas still tour the office every morning to greet staff and encourage feedback), and introducing the fundamentals of good customer service by telephone and in person.

He limited consultants to five house calls a day, reasoning that

no-one could achieve a high success rate from up to 14 daily calls.

The quality of blinds had been improved and, despite prices being increased by about 25 per cent, staff achieved a higher conversion rate because they were better trained and equipped for the job.

"It changed dramatically when we introduced that system, from maybe a 40 per cent conversion rate to a company average of about 65 per cent, which is a 25 per cent increase on sales," Cassar says.

The cost of sales also dropped, as the company was no longer chasing large numbers of unproductive leads.

In early 1999 Victory undertook more research, this time surveying its own customers along with those who had obtained a quote but ordered elsewhere.

While quality blinds and advice were important, there was a clear need for a home fashion advisory service. Respect for customers and their homes was also still a key issue.

Cassar and Venegas shared the results with their staff, and decided to put sales consultants

through an interior design course.

Stylish briefcases on wheels were provided to transport blind samples, and table-top protectors ensured that consultants did not scratch customers' furniture.

"It's only a small thing, but to customers who take a lot of pride in their home, it means a great deal," Cassar says.

Installation technicians, who had been given responsibility for explaining the operation, care and warranty of blinds, were also equipped for greater customer care.

A doormat is placed at the customer's front door, boots exchanged for Victory indoor slippers and white gloves donned as the fabric component of blinds is installed.

The last of these initiatives were introduced in March, and in May the company achieved its best sales month ever. It was not merely a pre-GST blip, as July sales were still 16 per cent up on the same month last year.

As a result, Cassar and Venegas have increased their number of technicians from 18 to 23, and their consultants from 30 to 35.