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Lessons Learned Through Another Company's History

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By Deborah Daily, Co-Owner, Buckaroo Marketing/New Media,

Nearly two years ago, one of our agency's longtime clients asked us to develop a coffee-table book celebrating their company's centennial. In bringing that project to fruition, I learned a lot about the company, but learned even more about running a business.

The company is Western States Manufacturing, a Cincinnati-area maker of centrifugal devices for the sugar, chemical, and pharmaceutical industries. Incorporated in 1917, it really dated back to 1894, when an industrious 16-year-old named Eugene Roberts took a job at a plant that processed sugar beets.

Eugene's work was backbreaking, and he knew there just had to be an easier way. So he studied the early centrifugals, puzzled over a major shortcoming, devised an elegant solution, and talked a processor into testing it. That idea earned him the first of his nearly 100 patents and led him to start a company known for innovations that transformed an industry (and helped turn a luxury into the low-priced commodity we spoon into coffee). Like many companies, Western States stumbled along the way, but every time its managers remembered and revived Eugene's emphasis on innovation, it recovered. Lesson learned: stay laser-focused on your purpose.

Telling the Western States story was easier because the company maintained an archive of materials from its earliest days and granted us complete access. There was so much material that we ended up scanning more than 5,500 documents and photographs, including early stock certificates, ledger books, handwritten minutes, and memos that brought history to life, such as the late 1950s letters their Havana representative sent to update management on the impact Fidel Castro was having on the island's sugar industry. Lesson learned: save even what seems to be pedestrian for posterity.

Western States' employees viewed customer service as a religion. I was particularly taken by the story of an employee named Larry who happened to be working on a Sunday afternoon when the phone rang. A furious customer in Baltimore reported that a part that should have

been delivered Friday never showed up, and the plant couldn't resume operation without it. Without a second thought, Larry walked into the shipping department, found the missing part, loaded it in his car, and drove to Baltimore. When the customer arrived at work Monday morning, Larry and the part were there. No supervisor authorized Larry's trip; he just knew how badly the customer needed the part. Lesson learned: hire people who have real empathy for your customers and empower them to do the right things.

Many of those employees spent months in remote corners of third-world nations, living like locals as they helped them build new sugar processing plants. Their competitors were content to ship parts overseas, but Western States sent people, too, creating loyalty that lasted decades. Lesson learned: become who your customers need you to be, instead of expecting them to conform to what's convenient for you.

In an era when we talk about people having a dozen careers in their working lives, Western States has multiple employees racking up 40-plus years of service. Typical was John, who celebrated his 50th anniversary as we compiled the book. He loved his job and co-workers so much that he refused to retire. Lesson learned: treat your employees as part of your family.

One reason the company earned so much loyalty from employees was that management nurtured the social side. Worker after worker recounted company outings, participation in their community's wacky boat race, holiday parties, baseball and bowling teams, and more. They were surrounded by more than their co-workers; these people became their lifelong friends. Lesson learned: give your team more than a paycheck -- help them become friends and create memories.

Of course, not every moment in the history was flattering to Western States. Still, they insisted we share the truth with as little varnish as possible. After all, those dark times were part of what brought the company to where it is today. Lesson learned: have the integrity to own up to mistakes in front of others.

Finally, when the company's board and management gave us the go-ahead to tell their story, they also gave us their implicit trust. We had access to everything and everyone we needed. When we expressed hesitations about the scope and the budget, they encouraged us to keep doing what we were doing. Their faith in our ability to make it happen never wavered. Lesson learned: treat your business partners like an integral part of your team.

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