

## Bottom to the top

HOW TO LEARN ABOUT YOUR BUSINESS AND CUSTOMERS

BY MEREDYTH MCKENZIE

**T**had Pryor learned his business from the bottom up. When he founded

Children of America Educational Childcare Centers in 1999, he was out running the first locations and learning the different jobs in the company. He was learning every aspect of the business.

"You have to go there and spend some time," says Pryor, chairman, president and CEO of the \$12 million company that posted fiscal 2007 revenue of \$12 million.

Pryor put that experience to good use, establishing 16 child care centers across the country that employ 400 people, and he plans to build 75 more centers during the next three years.

*Smart Business* spoke with Pryor about how to create strong customer service practices and learn about your business.

### Q. How do you develop strong customer service skills?

Customer service is knowing your client and who they are. Do surveys to your customer base, letting you know, "Were you satisfied?" They should know who their client is and be able to contact them and get reports on a daily, weekly or monthly basis.

In today's world, customer service is almost extinct. When you call major companies everything goes to voice mail; it's so impersonal. If you have customer service today and practice skills like business used to be 20 years ago, you will be the leader of the industry.

### Q. How do you communicate the importance of customer service skills to your employees?

Everything's done in training. It's almost like how we were taught as children to be polite, how to say thank you, how to say goodbye, how to be cordial and how to shake hands.

Customer service is no different than anything else in our lives, and it has to be practiced, preached and done at the top as well as the bottom. It's all in preparation and in how you're perceived prior to making the mistake.

You can't just preach; you've got to practice what you're preaching. You've got to be able to go out there and do it. You have to always be in the field, experimenting with people and learning their frustration so they can make it a better environment for your customer base.

### Q. How do you practice and preach good customer service skills?

If you don't do these things, you're not going to be the CEO for long because it's not going to be profitable and you're not going to be well perceived or liked. Be aware, listen to your advisors, don't be too quick to say yes, give yourself a day or two to think about it, say no on new ideas, then come back and think it through and deliver.

### Q. How do you stay connected with your business?

Never run it from a distance, always go into the field and

make sure that your product, dream and business are still the same.

Be on top of the curve and involved in your business on a daily basis. You can't helm it from afar; you have to actually be on the front line and see the experiences happening on a daily basis.

You have to know every aspect of your business. A lot of CEOs are hired in from big companies with great degrees. Magnificent talent, bright guys, but they've never been in the

got into the field.

You're going to have problems, but you're going to have a handle on that because you're familiar with your business and in tune with the industry.

### Q. How do you make sure you are getting out and seeing your business firsthand?

You must be able to roll your sleeves up, you have to go into the trenches. You can't direct from above. A lot of CEOs like to pass the buck and delegate, but in the long run, it's usually the wrong advice because they don't know their client base and are not aware of the customer service.

If a CEO doesn't have time to get out into the field and experience what the business is, that CEO isn't going to have a job for long. His job is to be the captain of a ship, not necessarily steer the wheel, but he's got to go out and visit. He's got to go out and live and breathe every aspect of that business and understand it. It's imperative that you take time if you want to be successful. If you don't, you're doomed.

Don't forget about what the real core of your business is. If it's in child care you need to go to those centers. If you have a Kinko's store you need to go to those stores and see if they're being run properly. The CEO has to get off his butt and go into the field and into every one of his stores. CEOs need to go in, visit and see firsthand how they look, how they smell, how the customers are being treated, how their employees are responding and how their employees look. <<



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industry, and that's where their shortfalls come because they never actually started the business from the ground up or

**HOW TO REACH:** Children of America Educational Childcare Centers, (800) 821-0561 or [www.childrenofamerica.com](http://www.childrenofamerica.com)