

## Disney Institute Helps Midwest Chain of Quick-Serve Restaurants Improve Customer Satisfaction, Reduce Employee Turnover

### SUMMARY

Runza Restaurants, a successful and well-respected chain of 79 quick-serve restaurants, had good customer satisfaction scores but wanted to push them even higher. The company's management team turned to *Disney Institute* to re-launch a chain-wide customer service program. After implementing many of the lessons learned, Runza saw dramatic jumps in customer satisfaction, as well as drops in customer complaints and employee turnover.

### FULL STORY

#### "We wanted to get great"

Although her 61-year-old, family-owned, quick-serve restaurant chain enjoyed robust sales and good customer service scores, Renee Sjulín, vice president of the Nebraska-based Runza Restaurant chain, and her team felt they could do better. "No matter how successful a business is, it can always get better," she says.

"We took a hard look at our satisfaction surveys and discovered that our food scores were a bit higher than our customer service scores," she explains. "We were good but that wasn't enough. We wanted to get great. So we asked *Disney Institute* for help."

*Disney Institute* facilitator Tom Madden met with Sjulín and other Runza managers and tailored a program that included topics such as Disney's Approach to Quality Service, Loyalty and People Management. "We knew that Runza already had a great operation," says Madden, who is a former restaurant manager. "So we were committed to helping them kick it up a notch."

#### APPLYING DISNEY EXPERTISE

A few months later, Sjulín and more than 40 Runza executives came to *Disney Institute* at the *Walt Disney*

*World*<sup>®</sup> Resort in Lake Buena Vista, Fla., to take part in an intensive one-day program led by Madden and co-facilitator Cyndi Michalos-Baker. Madden lost no time in showing how Disney expertise could be applied to Runza's operations.

"All of us saw so many parallels between what Disney does so well and what we need to do better," says Sjulín. For example, the Runza staffers, many of whom manage some

of the chain's 79 restaurants, were intrigued to see the training video shown to potential Cast Members (Disney-speak for employees). The video outlines what is expected of Cast Members if they are hired.

"That really hit home with us," says Sjulín. "We saw how we could do the same and let our prospective employees know—in a positive way—what wasn't negotiable; things like appearance and not smoking."

A field visit to Sunshine Seasons Restaurant at *Epcot*<sup>®</sup> was one of the highlights of the program. "It was a great chance for the Runza attendees to, as we like to say, 'experience the business behind the magic'," says Michalos-Baker. Chef Alex Pfluger offered a tour of both the back of the house ("off stage") and the front of the house ("on stage").

Says Sjulín, "Alex spoke our language. One of the many things he said that resonated with all of us was, 'Cook less, more often.' It's something we may have all known but it's

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## CASE STUDY: RUNZA RESTAURANTS

a message we've adopted as our own. There's a real power to seeing theory put into practice."

### VALUABLE LESSONS

How effective was Runza's *Disney Institute* experience? Sjulín and others at the restaurant chain are quick to credit Disney with helping them breathe new life into their customer service program and more. "Inspired by Disney, we've rolled out our enhanced customer service program, 'Simply Outstanding Service' (SOS)," says Sjulín.

"Disney taught us how important it is to empower our people," she adds. Now, if a customer doesn't get, say, the right condiments on his Runza sandwich, employees are empowered to take care of the problem immediately.

"Disney taught us a valuable lesson," explains Sjulín. "It may not be your fault, but it is your problem."

Employees have obviously taken this to heart. They've been solving problems on the spot, as opposed to letting a customer leave a Runza restaurant unsatisfied. Since the program was instituted, complaint calls to the chain's 800 number have dropped by 50 percent.

Focusing more on the customer experience has also paid off. "We've worked to get everyone on board," says Sjulín. "Disney convinced us that it's important to have every single employee take ownership of the customer experience." Almost immediately after the chain instituted the SOS changes, customer satisfaction scores jumped from 79 percent to 89 percent across the entire chain.

And that Disney pre-employment video that so impressed the Runza executives? The company produced its own version, carefully spelling out what was expected of potential hires. Runza is also rolling out a new employee orientation program. "Now the people we hire are a better fit," says Sjulín. Again, the proof is in the numbers; employee turnover has dropped by 25 percent.

"We're thrilled with our results," says Sjulín. "The numbers are great and, best of all, they've stayed great." Not bad for a company that said they were good but "wanted to get great."