

# The Public Perspective

By Karel Murray, CSP

Dressed in saggy blue jeans, black t-shirt embossed with an image of himself and scuffed black athletic shoes, the employee named Chumlee is the first thing I noticed when I first watched the History Channel's "Pawn Stars". Throughout the program, Chumlee is used as a focus point for humor. The eye rolling of the owners when witnessing his apparent lack of intelligence is starting to drive me to distraction for a few different reasons.

1. *Why would any business allow their employees to meet and greet the public dressed and acting in a slovenly way?* <http://tinyurl.com/7hdkx3g>

The whole process of customer service begins the first 15 seconds I walk into a business or meet a representative of a company at a luncheon. The main input begins with the general appearance of the person I'm seeing. I haven't had time to assess ability or personality, just how they appear to me. If cleanliness and a professional demeanor is of importance to me, then a slovenly employee would turn me off immediately. If the employees appear this way, then what I can actually expect in the service or quality of the product I may be buying? I base that analysis on the equation; *slovenly equals uncaring which equals lack of quality.*

Why would any company want to work hard to overcome a negative first impression when it is so easily repaired? But, I also have to acknowledge that the business appearance is established by assessing the clientele they wish to attract. That is a very specific strategic call to make with creating the overall brand.

2. *If an employee doesn't have the intelligence and/or skills to manage the job, why on earth are they still with the company?*

I'm going to make a very broad statement - every employee is a reflection on the business owners. If their staff doesn't have the ability to problem solve, manage a transaction smoothly from beginning to end or anticipate customer needs, I feel they are setting the business up for failure. As a business grows, the most difficult thing for an owner is to "clone" themselves by hiring individuals who understand and live the vision. This requires coaching, mentoring and oversight. Personally, I believe it is never easy to manage people we enjoy socially. But when your business success depends upon your staff, it's time to toughen up and set parameters that make sense in the long run. Then enforce it.

Or it can be as simple as putting the right people in the right job. Chumlee actually has knowledge on some very specific areas. How to light that spark to expand his knowledge and ability to relay that to the customer should be the focus of day to day coaching.

3. *When is it ever permissible to embarrass or make fun of an employee to the public, especially one that may not be able to defend themselves verbally?*

Forrest Gump said it best, “Stupid is as stupid does”. We all make those bone-headed remarks at some point. To laugh at the implication of what we said is human nature. Bill Engvall has built a career out of his famous line “Here’s your sign”. However, there comes a level of harassment that is unacceptable. It takes the form of shaming a person in front of others in order to make yourself look better in the eyes of the customer or client. Good fun has its limits. At some point it takes on the appearance of hazing...mean spirited fun at the expense of others.

As business owners we have a responsibility to protect all levels of staff against a hostile work environment, even if the employee doesn’t even realize they are in one due to their intellectual capacity.

I understand that this is typical television programming garnered to capture an audience that appreciates ridiculous behavior and some of the standard rules of leadership and/or etiquette in the workplace don’t apply. But, isn’t mass media also powerful enough to change the perspective of the viewers? If bad behavior is rewarded enough times, won’t others want to copy that behavior because it’s “cool”?

My mother had a saying which I know some of you have heard growing up “*monkey sees, monkey does*” which means learning a process without understanding what it does. She tried to teach me that just because we see someone else doing something doesn’t mean we should automatically do the same thing. We have our intelligence for a reason and it is important that we use our ability of discretion when moving forward with certain behaviors.

So, my message to Chumlee... if you are willing to be perceived by the general public as a duffus and building a fan base that appreciates your ineptness, more power to you. Ultimately it is up to each of us to consider the legacy we leave behind. The really sad part is, if there weren’t these laughable stereotypical characteristics on full display in this program, it probably wouldn’t be the ratings darling it is today.

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