

L.L.Bean President shares secrets to top-notch customer service

By [Kathy Mance](#) | Published: September 14, 2010 [blog nrf.com](#)

For many years, the [NRF Foundation](#) and American Express have been strong partners in promoting excellence in customer service. Five years ago, we launched the [Customer's Choice Awards](#), asking consumers to tell us, with no prompts or lists, who consistently provides the best service. While we're happy to honor retailing's best each year, we are also endeavoring to share these companies' best practices with other retailers.

This year we asked the [top ten retailers](#) to tell us more about their philosophy, their strategies, how their employees figure into their plans and more.

[L.L. Bean](#) has the distinction of being the only retailer to win top ranking for three of the five years. We figured that made them the first company retailers and others would like to hear from. So we asked President and CEO [Chris McCormick](#), a 27-year retail veteran, "What makes L.L. Bean different from its competitors?" (And because retail careers is our other passion, we also asked Chris some questions about retail as a career destination for the Foundation's [retail careers blog](#)).



Chris McCormick

L.L. Bean has been the first-place recipient of the Customers' Choice Awards for the past three years, and among the top ten since 2006. How has your company nurtured the culture of service that has earned you this recognition?

While today's business environment may differ from what it was in 1912, the philosophy of the company has not changed. Superior customer service has always been and always will

be the cornerstone of our brand and is a cultural attribute that differentiates us from the rest of the pack. It originated with L.L.'s "Golden Rule" of treating customers like human beings and our service culture has continued to evolve.

[Leon Gorman](#), L.L.'s grandson and now Chairman of the L.L.Bean Board once said: "A lot of people have fancy things to say about customer service, but it's just a day-in, day-out, ongoing, never-ending, persevering, compassionate kind of activity." It's absolutely true and as President of L.L.Bean, I feel it's my duty to make sure this legacy lives on.

How would you define superior customer service?

We start by letting the customer define what constitutes good customer service and then we act upon those attributes. This is really important – you can't tell customers "you will be satisfied" – they need to arrive at that conclusion on their own through the service experience itself.

Our 100% satisfaction guarantee stands as a prime example of our service philosophy since it is all about letting customers define what "satisfactory" means to them. We serve customers by listening and promptly responding to each customer's specific needs in a friendly and professional manner, by being knowledgeable about our products, and being willing to solve a full range of problems. On the selling side, superior service is also accomplished by providing a pleasant shopping and service experience across all channels and communicating with customers in their preferred channel or medium.

To what do you attribute the public's perception of L.L. Bean's commitment to satisfying its customers? What do you do differently from other companies?

As a multi-channel business, L.L.Bean serves customers with knowledgeable employees who are very customer focused. We believe in personal, prompt service, which is why we answer the majority of our calls within 20 seconds and always with a "live" person. We respond to emails and chats, and invite customers to comment on and recommend products on our website. Our company uses a combination of expertise and testing to enhance existing products based on customer feedback, and social media affords yet another opportunity to engage customers and build brand awareness.

In our retail stores our expert staff is always ready to help. Our flagship store in Freeport, Maine, takes pride in serving customers 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

What has this achievement meant to your employees? How has it informed their loyalty to the company? Are training programs in place that reinforce your commitment to quality service?

Employees are trained to take the time each individual customer requires to feel valued, whether through the mail, on the phone, over the Internet, or in our stores. We have some of the best employees in the world and it is through their personal commitment to service that we achieve recognition. Customer facing employees in particular take it upon

themselves to be ambassadors of the L.L.Bean brand and they take great pride in the responsibility of this role. Internally, this is really nothing new – service is what we do at L.L.Bean.

But the recent public recognition and awards has led to an expanded internal movement of seeing that all employees understand their contribution to the overall customer experience. Additionally we have a corporate “Code Green” program that encourages non front-line employees to pitch in during our peak months and experience servicing our customers firsthand.

Do you have customer loyalty programs in place? How have the tenets of those programs evolved over the years?

Our L.L.Bean Visa program offers free shipping, free returns shipping and the ability to build coupon dollars toward future purchases. We have the added benefit of customer loyalty due to our legendary service brand. We treat each customer as a valued long time friend.

What kind of challenges do you face as you strive to maintain your standing with customers, as well as your reputation for quality customer service?

As customers become more experienced shopping in a multi-channel world, their expectations for service increase. From store pick-ups for online orders to making catalog returns in person, customers want their service experiences to be seamless. While this will become a bigger challenge for us as we expand retail, it also provides a great opportunity for us to differentiate ourselves in the market. Our goal is to maintain our leadership position for the best customer service.

Do you have a mechanism for measuring customer satisfaction and the responsiveness of your employees?

Weekly online surveys provide us with rich customer feedback for continuous improvement. We also mail surveys twice yearly with more detailed questions on our service interactions. Online ratings and reviews provide us with the ability to monitor our customers’ perception of our products, and social media exposes us to the pulse of what’s on customer’s minds.