



JOHNNY QUIRIN

Ron Alvesteffer, president of Service Express and adamant Pittsburgh Steelers fan, is opening up an office in Pittsburgh this year.

A culture of growth has Service Express churning

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Awards and recognition are nice, but what a local computer hardware maintenance company values more is its averaged 20 percent growth rate each year for the past 10 years and its 98 percent customer retention rate — not an easy task for a third-party provider.

“Most of our customers already have a service contract, usually with the original equipment manufacturer: IBM, HP, Sun, or Dell,” said Ron Alvesteffer, president of Grand Rapids-based Service Express.

“We’ll come in, sit down with them, find out what their needs are and what they would like to see from a service provider, then give them a customized proposal that meets their needs.

“That’s how we differentiate ourselves. A lot of customers don’t know there’s another option out there.”

The company has experienced a 26 percent staff increase and has offices across the nation, including a new office in Pittsburgh.

Service Express has been named to the Inc. 5000 list of Fastest Growing Private Companies in America for the past three years. It’s been a 101 Best and Brightest Companies to Work For six years in a row and a 2009 Winner by Corp! Magazine as one of Michigan’s Economic Bright Spots.

Though the company isn’t a giant like IBM, it attributes its competitiveness to its small size.

“We’re much more flexible. We’re much more nimble. We’re much quicker. There’s not a lot of red tape,” he said.

“Many customers are going to a low-touch/no-touch form of customer service. You see it at the grocery store when you have to check out your own groceries now.

“The OEMs are trying to build the machines that way, but things still happen and (customers) would still like to see someone show up and fix it instead of getting the runaround.”

Service Express goes the opposite route with a high-touch form of customer service. Alvesteffer said that much of the work the company does is in the middle of the night. When a customer calls, the company makes sure they talk to a human instead of a voice recognition system, and when a service call is required, that help is onsite within four hours.

Each customer is also assigned a specific service engineer so they can talk to the same person each time they have a problem.

The commitment to a high-touch customer service approach is an extension of the company’s culture.

“Our vision is to work with employees to help them achieve their personal, professional and financial goals. What that really means is, we believe in surrounding ourselves with the right people and figuring out what their goals are, and then working with them to help them achieve those goals,” he said.

“It’s really our business strategy. If I help everyone in the company achieve their goals, our business plan and our business goals will more than take care of themselves.”

To support this view, Service Express employees update their goals on a monthly basis and meet with Alvesteffer on a quarterly basis to review those goals.

“One of the biggest mistakes people make is to take people who are good and move them into management, even though they don’t want to, just because they’re good,” he said.

“What do you want to achieve here, and let’s work together to achieve that. How much money do you want to make? Some people are afraid of that conversation because what if they say some big number? I celebrate that,” Alvesteffer said.

“Then we’re huge on the work-life balance,” he added.

This method has also led to regional company expansions.

“I have a service engineer that is interested in moving to Chattanooga, Tennessee. This is where he and his wife and children want to relocate. Now we’re making plans to open an office there next year — built around his goal. I have a regional sales manager in Nashville right now because he came to us. The kids graduated school, and he and his wife wanted to move farther south. He lives there now. We helped him achieve his goal and it opened up a whole new region for us as a company. Now I’m building a region around this proven performer, this leader down there in Nashville.

“It really works, and it’s doing it the right way. What I really like is helping people get to where they want to be,” said Alvesteffer.

“If we do that, the business side of it will take care of itself. What we’ve found out is it’s paid off tenfold for us with employee loyalty, engagement and results.”