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Cheering staff turn commerce into entertainment

By Lauren Weber

NEW YORK (Reuters) - It was a quiet August morning at the Cold Stone Creamery in Times Square -- until a customer stuffed some money into a cup near the ice cream shop's cash register.

"Hey, we got a tip!" the cashier shouted. The dozen or so workers on the assembly line launched into "Hello, Dollar," sung to the melody of the show tune "Hello, Dolly," as they continued to add candy and other mix-ins to mounds of ice cream.

Incidents like this evoke smiles from some people and wincing from others. But more and more stores and restaurants are turning to cheers -- sung, yelled, crooned and bellowed -- to motivate employees and entertain customers.

"Companies believe they're selling experiences," said Ben Dattner, who heads his namesake organizational consulting firm. "First there was a manufacturing economy, then a service economy. Now we're in the experience economy."

Cold Stone employees share that view.

"You have to be outgoing for this job," said 22-year-old Cold Stone server Ejiro Ajueyitsi. "It's not only a service, it's also a performance."

Prospective Cold Stone employees must not only submit to a typical interview, but also demonstrate their ability to sing and "bust a move," or dance.

"Most of our crew members are young people, and they want a fun and entertaining ambience," said Susan Landgraf, vice president for training at the Scottsdale, Arizona-based chain, which has about 450 locations.

But the staff's antics don't amuse everyone.

"Some people say, 'I'll give you a dollar, but please don't sing,'" said Tanner Lagasca, another employee at Cold Stone's Times Square store. "We call that a silent tip."

MOOD ELEVATOR OR EMOTIONAL LABOR?

At Taco Bell, don't be surprised to hear employees pounding on counters and shouting "Champs!" or a customer's name. Workers there and at other Yum Brands Inc. chains like KFC and Pizza Hut are encouraged to cheer each other's accomplishments, like meeting a service target, or even friendly patrons.

Cheering, part of a "customer mania" initiative the company is using to try to improve service, "elevates the mood instantly," said Anne Byerlein, Yum's human resources executive.

Wal-Mart Stores Inc. was one of the first U.S. companies to use cheers, though mainly as a team-building experience for employees.

After spelling out the Wal-Mart name, salespeople are asked "Who's number one?"

"The customer! Always!" they reply.

Likewise, the Cold Stone Creamery and Yum cheers extend into the corporate suite and are standard fare at staff or shareholder meetings.

Organizational and retail experts say such stunts can be effective, but only if the corporate culture supports that level of enthusiasm. If it's forced, it can irritate employees -- and customers.

At first, cheers may seem silly or embarrassing to workers who see pep rallies as an activity for high school students, not adults trying to support a family on low wages.

But if employees get into the spirit of the drill, it can enhance job satisfaction, said Ken Harris, a retail consultant with Wilton, Connecticut-based Cannondale Associates.

"It takes something that's excruciatingly mundane -- the assembly-line job -- and elevates it to something fun," he said.

Dattner, the organizational consultant, referred to cheering as "emotional labor," a term sociologist Arlie Hochschild coined to describe when a worker's feelings become part of the sales process.

Such work can be stressful, Dattner said. "It's very hard to smile and convey positive emotions all day."

Cold Stone's Lagasca, an aspiring actor, said he enjoys performing for customers, but admitted it's not for everyone.

"You need to be high-energy," he said. "It doesn't work if there's low energy."