

Burton Snowboards

Competition and Burton Snowboards

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Mike Abraham works with a dedicated group of sales associates at Burton Snowboards. He strives continually and competitively to be one of the company's greatest assets. At times, this can cause friction among his co-workers. The following is a chronological account of one such occasion.

Mike Abraham

Mike was born and raised in the affluent town of Fairfield, Connecticut. He attended Fairfield College Preparatory School where he was placed on the honor roll three out of his four years. While attending Fairfield, he was a two-year member of the soccer team, in addition to fulfilling his roles as class treasurer. His impressive high school record warranted a partial academic scholarship from the University of Vermont, which he graciously accepted. Mike did not play soccer at the University, preferring instead to devote most of his time and effort into his academic work. It was during his freshman year that he first began snowboarding on many of Vermont's famous mountains. He quickly fell in love with the sport, and developed for it a passion from which he has yet to recover.

After the winter of his freshman year, Mike knew snowboarding would become a lifelong activity. He continued his sophomore and junior years in pursuit of majoring in business administration and minoring in economics, all the while snowboarding from the first snow of the year to the last. Despite the concentration of his studies, the last thing Mike wanted for his future was to sit in a cubicle at a traditional corporate job. Mike's ideal job would be one that combined his love for snowboarding and his plan to enter the business world. During the fall semester of his senior year, Mike contacted Burton Snowboards, a famous snowboard company headquartered in Burlington, Vermont, for an interview. After sending the company his résumé, and conducting a series of interviews with store manager Drew Lucier, Mike was hired for a job^[1]. Mr. Lucier was first impressed with the way Mike had reached out to him and shown initiative. During the interviews, Mike composed himself in a highly professional manner while displaying his positive attitude. Mr. Lucier and Mike agreed that he would begin working as a sales associate for the Burlington store following his graduation in the spring.

Burton Snowboards

Jake Burton Carpenter founded Burton Snowboards in 1977, which has since become the world's first and biggest snowboard factory^[2]. Jake personifies Burton, as he greatly influences and enthusiastically drives for innovative snowboard equipment produced by the company. The company's main building is currently located in Burlington, Vermont, with 4,348 stores across the world in addition to an online Burton market^[3]. When Jake first started engineering snowboards, his biggest goal was to create an experience similar to surfing, yet on snow. Jake engineered the first few Burton boards with minimal external help and resources, naming his first creation the Back hill^[4]. The Back hill, and other earlier designs, lacked safety and smoothness, creating further incentive to continuously innovate and improve the product. Some of the earlier models included single wooden boards, single strap bindings, and a rope strap for balance. When snowboarding was in its introductory stage, its

popularity lacked due to the quality of the boards in regards to comfort, among other things. Through the introductions of various materials, which helped improve the quality, safety, and overall design, the sport became much easier to perform[5]. Included among these materials was aluminum, used primarily on the fins of the snowboard. The next developments eventually lead to the modern snowboard design, comprised mainly of wood, fiberglass, and plastic material[6].

Burton doesn't limit their focus entirely on snowboards. Included in their product offerings is apparel, primarily with a focus on winter apparel, although Burton offers other clothing appropriately suited for the snowboarding culture[7]. Burton understands their target market, and offers clothing best suited for their audience's style and preference. Burton's general target market is snowboarders of any age or gender. Burton offers products for all demographics to satisfy the needs of a full range of customers. The company offers products for adults, men and women, youth, and an older audience. Burton understands the importance of a nonexclusive business in regards to potential consumers.

Burton Snowboards has the advantage of being the largest producer of snowboards, and often has the most innovative products. Burton has created a reputable reputation while gaining influence through involvement with various events and shows. Burton riders competed in and ended up winning the first US Open, a now annual snowboard competition[8]. Burton has further strengthened their reputation as Olympians have won gold medals using Burton's gear[9]. In regards to competition, Burton has a huge advantage for their early involvement in the snowboard industry, and it truly sits on the top. Competitors include all other snowboard companies, including K2, DC, CAPiTA, among others. Burton sets itself apart from its competitors by focusing its attention on snowboards exclusively, where as other companies juggle snowboards and skis. By exclusively offering snowboards, Burton can reach full potential in product development instead of having to also manage innovation for skis.

Culture

Burton creates a distinctive culture surrounding snowboarding for their customers. Through this desired culture, Burton has created a definable philosophy within the organization itself. Burton wants to create a comfortable and relatable shopping experience. As a sales associate at a Burton store, there is a primary focus on customer satisfaction, and to create customer satisfaction, Burton wants to ensure employee satisfaction[10]. Within the company, 98% of yearly associates have been promoted, creating sense of place and safety within the company[11]. It would be safe to label Burton as a company with a strong clan culture (see Figure 2-3 at the end of this case)[12]. Most employees agree that working for Burton is like working for a second family. In addition to the appeal of job stability, Burton creates a fun working environment, which leads to customer loyalty and satisfaction. A driving force to develop and motivate sales associates at Burton is a friendly sales competition[13]. Sales associates aim to make the most sales at the end of each day, keeping a tally invisible to customers. The game kills two birds with one stone; associates want to perform well next to their peers, and therefore deliver the best customer service. The ideal sales associate is friendly, knowledgeable, genuine, and always knows what to say to make the customer have a comfortable, and helpful experience. Ideal sale associates usually develop over a full year of sales floor experience[14]. Through continuous experience working with customers and sales associates, the sales associates improves within this friendly sales competition, and the customers become loyal and satisfied. That leads directly to an increase in profit for the company.

Mike's Stirs the Competition

After his first eight months working at Burton, Mike was quickly becoming a valuable sales associate. He was engaging customers while providing the type of service that has become expected from the store. Mike was also extremely knowledgeable of the company products, and could find customers what they were looking for in seemingly record time. All of these things combined with Mike's driven personality guaranteed that he frequently finished at the top of the daily sales count competitions, though not without controversy. A number of associates complained to Mr. Lucier that Mike had been "stealing" customers they had already been assisting.

A female sales associate brought to Mr. Lucier's attention one of the alleged occasions. One weekday she left a group of customers in the store to see if a certain color of bindings was in stock. As the customers waited, Mike approached them and asked what they were looking for. Unlike the female associate, Mike knew the exact location of those particular bindings in stock. While the female associate was looking for them behind the stocked snowboards, which is where she thought they were, Mike grabbed them next to the stocked boots and made the sale[15]. The female associate was angry that Mike hadn't asked them if they had already received help.

In addition to the aforementioned case, Mike was accused of negatively impacting some existing employee-customer relationships. Because of Burton's emphasis on quality customer service, many associates develop friendships with their customers[16]. These repeat customers often come in and ask for the associates they have bonded with before they shop. The customers can count on these associates to cater their needs as they tend to learn that customers tendencies and preferences over time. Two associates complained to Mr. Lucier that Mike was reaching out to their friendly customers before they were. These associates accused Mike of ignoring their previous relationship with the customer. It seemed to them that he breaking up these important customer connections to increase his sales count, and therefore making himself appear more credible.

Conclusion

After listening to all the complaints, Mr. Lucier approached Drew and brought the subject to his attention. Drew said he was unaware that the female associate had already been helping those customers, and apologized. He also promised to pay more attention to special employee-customer relationships. In spite of his words, Mike appeared to be hurt by what he heard.

In the weeks following Mike's talk with Mr. Lucier, his fellow associates noticed a dramatic shift in attitude. He became passive and distant, reaching out to customers only if they asked him for help first. Once Drew heard about this, he knew he had a decision to make. Clearly Mike's negative attitude would affect the overall strength of the store, and not in a positive way. Because Mike was young and still learning, Drew opted for a meeting. He called Mike and all the sale's associates together to openly communicate the issue and find a way to resolve it.

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[5] "Burton Snowboards Inc. History." *History of Burton Snowboards Inc*. International Directory of Company Histories, 2002.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Reingold, Jennifer. "Burton Snowboards." *Fast Company*.

[8] "Burton Snowboards Inc. History." *History of Burton Snowboards Inc*. International Directory of Company Histories, 2002

[9] Ibid.

[10] Personal Interview with Drew Lucier

[11] Ibid.

[12] Kinicki, Angelo, and Mel Fugate. *Organizational Behaviour: Key Concepts, Skills & Best Practices*. 5th ed.

[13] Personal interview with Drew Lucier

[14] Ibid.

[15] Personal Interview with Drew Lucier

[16] Ibid.