

Sweet Treats and Sweet Service:  
The Combination for Local Business Owner's Success

Despite concerns from family and friends that Brookings had potentially reached the point of saturation for a town of its size with six coffee shops, and in the face of 2010's volatile economy, Donna Behrend had a vision: to open her own business and serve the city its best cup of coffee.

A North Dakota native, Bherend moved from Fargo to Brookings after marrying her husband 5 years ago. After the move she took a job in Watertown making the nearly 45 minute commute during the work week. Although the commute was not ideal, it was doable and Behrend made it work. Things changed for her after the birth of her second child and she and her husband agreed that the long commute to Watertown was not a realistic option for their family.

To stay in town during the work week, Bherend took a job at the Starbucks located in the Brookings Hy-Vee supermarket. She had previous work history with the company but after some time, Donna Bherend had tired of working on someone else's schedule for someone else's dollar. Although she admits that her Biology degree from North Dakota State University may have not prepared her for running a coffee shop, her combined 7 ½ years working for Starbucks had. While some of what she learned from Starbucks' customer service training has helped inspire her training techniques for her staff, it is a lot less rigid and more about the individual.

The idea that individuals matter speaks volumes to the person Behrend is. From the time customers walk into the store, they are greeted with a heartfelt welcome and smile as they are offered a sample of fudge. "I love the idea that just sharing a small sample of fudge and a delicious drink can make someone's day, and I truly believe that it does," Behrend says.

Brookings newcomer, Leah Nelson noticed Behrend's kindness on her first visit to her store. Nelson recently came to the city of Brookings accepting a graduate assistant position for the South Dakota State University softball team. Nelson reflected on her first time at Choco Latte and said, "I came from California, I did not know anyone or where to go in town. Someone from my class told me to go to Choco Latte because of the fudge. I did, and from the moment I walked in, her welcoming smile was definitely a cure to my loneliness from being new in town."

Nelson admits that Behrend talked her into buying a pound of her delectable fudge so she could receive the free 16 oz beverage that comes with it on that first visit. "She introduced herself and asked me about my move, about the softball team and genuinely cared about what I had to say. After that, I could not say no. I left and I could not get over how nice she and her staff were." After her positive experience Nelson enjoys a satisfying Choco Latte coffee beverage several times a week.

Many people have complimented Behrend on her staff. She employs 13 people, all of whom are college students at SDSU. While employing students has its limitations with scheduling, she believes that she is getting the best customer service from them because working at Choco Latte is usually more than just a job to them. It gives them something to add to their resume and experience in customer service that they can take with them into the future. During the interview process Behrend looks for the applicant to smile, "Even if they are nervous, they can still at least smile," she says. She will be looking to replace many of her employees since 7 of her staff are graduating at the end of this semester.

One employee, Angie Bomczech has worked at Choco Latte for 1 ½ years and plans to continue working for Behrend until she graduates in the spring of 2013. She initially chose to apply to work at Choco Latte because everyone was friendly to her as a customer. “Everyone seemed happy and nice, so I figured it was a good place to work at too,” Bomczek recalled. Bomczech confirmed that she believes everyone at Choco Latte enjoys their work because Behrend takes an interest in each of her employees. “Donna is always positive and supports everyone here. She cares about what we want to do and gives us opportunities to try things other employers would not.” As a graphic design major she appreciates that Behrend takes advantage of her talents by allowing her to make posters and paint on the shop’s windows for special occasions.

Many other Brookings businesses have noticed the success of Choco Latte’s customer service. According to the company website Aramark Food Services as a corporation has been renowned as one of Fortune 500’s “Most Admired Companies” in 2011. With such a prestigious recognition from a company employing 240,000 people worldwide, it may surprise many that during training at the SDSU campus, a locally owned business takes precedent in customer service discussions.

“The students at SDSU are asked who in town has the best customer service, and Choco Latte is always a top contender,” Aramark manager Katie Hartway said. She notes that for a locally owned business employing all college students, Behrend is doing something right. “Our employees in training always note that everyone working is always smiling and asking people how they are doing. It really connects with customers.”

Although today, Choco Latte is usually so full of happy and satisfied customers that at times the South Dakota State students cannot find a table to conduct their studies or an outlet for their laptop, it did not start off that way. Behrend admits that she was nervous opening the coffee shop. “Everyone said I it would fail, that there were not enough people in town to support another coffee shop. But I knew I could make it work, because no one else had a drive through window, I had the experience and because it had to work.” Despite her enthusiasm, one of the greatest challenges the coffee shop faced was that it took a while for people in town to come to the store.

Behrend worried that people would not ever come, and that they would have to close the doors. After relentless advertising on the radio and in the newspapers, people started showing up at Choco Latte. The upturn in the economy has also helped Choco Latte see profits grow since it opened 2 years ago. Behrend learned a lot from the first year of her store’s opening. “The Country Town and Shopper was the most successful form of advertising for us. We would advertise a flavor and people would come in asking for it.”

Looking back Behrend thinks about all of the obstacles of opening her coffee shop. But she was always confident in her abilities, “I was the only one who could make it work,” Bherend said. Plus, she points out; Choco Latte has several secret weapons that distinguish it from all its competitors in town: a great staff and the indulgent goodies that offer customers a break from their busy day, even if for only a moment.

Bherend spent her time growing up watching her mother make candies and specialty treats. For every holiday her mom would make individual candies with crystal sugars, caramels and chocolates reflecting the themes of the party. She considers what her work does a unique way to honor the time spent with her mom.

Although she admits Brookings is a little small, she is now enjoying her move. One of her favorite parts of running Choco Latte, other than seeing her two daughters every day has been the sense of community running Choco Latte has given her. Because she worked away from town and had little outside interaction with Brookings locals she did not know many people outside of her family members. Now, Bherend has developed a relationship with all of her regular customers. "I see them in the shop and in town while I am running errands. It has made Brookings home now and I know I will never leave this town."