

Spotlight on **Timpson**

Ranked 29th in 2024

Timpson has consistently improved its scores in our Customer Experience Excellence Report index over the last two years, moving up an impressive 45 places this year alone. With notable increases in Empathy and Expectations, the company's unique approach to management is clearly paying off. We spoke to Sir John Timpson, Chairman, Timpson, to understand how the company's 'upside down management' philosophy is driving both employee satisfaction and customer loyalty. Here are his thoughts.

Improvements in customer satisfaction

"At the heart of our success is our management philosophy, which we call 'upside down management,'" says Timpson. "It's a colleague-focused culture where we prioritise the wellbeing and happiness of our staff. When your employees are happy and empowered, that naturally translates into better customer service. We trust our colleagues to look after customers in the way they see fit.

"The inspiration for this approach actually came from a visit to Nordstrom in the US about 25 years ago. I observed how they empowered their front-line staff and flipped the traditional management pyramid, making it the job of management to serve the employees. Customers responded so well to this model that I decided to bring it to Timpson, where it's now at the core of everything we do."

Implementing an 'upside down' management philosophy

"The first step was to completely rethink the role of head office. Traditionally, head offices believe they run the business through command and control, creating rules and procedures that frontline staff are expected to follow. But this is stifling. So, we removed that power dynamic. At Timpson, no one tells anyone else what to do. Instead, we focus on just two rules: 'Look the part' and 'Put money in the till.'

"We also eliminated systems of control. For example, we don't use EPOS systems to track our people. Our IT department's role is to equip and enable our staff, not monitor them. The head office now focuses on allocating resources, determining strategy, and continuously improving our culture — nothing more."

Getting the right people

"Recruiting the right people is crucial. At Timpson, we recruit for personality, not skills. We don't care much about qualifications or CVs. We just look at the candidate and figure out who they are. There's no customer satisfaction in dealing with a grumpy cobbler! We learned from Disney that you need people who are nines or tens in terms of attitude and positivity.

"Half of our new recruits come through recommendations from colleagues – friends and family members who have the right attitude. It's a case of like attracting like. We also use the Mr. Men characters as a basis for our talent acquisition. We're looking for Mr. Happy, not Mr. Grumpy or Mr. Slow. If they tick the right boxes, we put them in the shop for half a day to see how they do.



"About 12 percent of our employees are former prisoners. We believe that people shouldn't be punished for a mistake for the rest of their lives. If you place people in the right environment and give them a chance, they can display their strengths.

"It's not without challenges. Many of these individuals don't have money or accommodation when they're released, so we help with those things to give them a good start. Once they're with us, they're treated with the same respect as any other colleague. It's all about finding people who will thrive in our business.

"And of course, sometimes we don't get it right, but even then, we part ways kindly and generously, ensuring we leave as friends."

Management philosophy

"Our managers are there to enable people to be the best they can be. If a colleague needs a new machine, it's the manager's job to get it for them as soon as possible. Removing obstacles is fundamental. A good boss is also a great listener and a mentor, someone who looks at the whole person, not just their work.

"When a high-performing colleague's performance dips, it's usually due to external factors like mental health issues or stress. We have over 100 mental health first aiders in the company because we see ourselves as much a social enterprise as a corporate one. Helping and supporting our people when they need it is central to our ethos.

"We've also established a degree course that outlines what it means to be a great boss at Timpson. Managers do this alongside their work, learning how to support and elevate their colleagues through encouragement rather than command and control."

Engaging colleagues

"We like to say thank you to our colleagues, so we have 19 holiday homes that colleagues can access without charge.

"We have a weekly newsletter that focuses on our people and spreads good news across the business.

"The 'Making Dreams Come True' program is one of my favourite initiatives. Any Timpson colleague can submit a dream or aspiration they want to fulfil. These can range from personal goals, like taking a special holiday, to life-changing requests, such as home improvements or medical treatments. Colleagues can also nominate each other.

"A panel reviews the submissions based on the impact the dream will have on the colleague's life, rather than the cost or scale of the request. We focus on helping in meaningful ways. Over the years, we've supported all sorts of dreams, from fertility treatments to attending special family events. It's just one of the ways we say thank you to our people."

Sustaining customer experience excellence

"All of these factors combine to ensure we have people with great personalities delivering great experiences to our customers every day. Interestingly, our customer satisfaction has increased since the lockdown. During the pandemic, we had to restrict access to our shops, so we put one person in the shop, usually our best and most engaging individual. This model worked so well that we've kept it. Our colleagues like being masters of their own destiny, and customers appreciate dealing with the same person each time.

"We also avoid talking to customers through technology. Our customers prefer interacting with real people, so we don't interpose technology between our colleagues and customers. It's all about that one-to-one human relationship, and that's made a huge difference for us.

"If I have to give one piece of advice it would be to focus on your people. If you get that right, everything else will follow. Trust them, empower them, and give them the tools to succeed. When your employees are happy and motivated, your customers will feel it too."

In summary

It's clear that Sir John Timpson's approach to management isn't just about running a business — it's about creating a culture where people thrive. And when people thrive, so does the customer experience. Timpson's ongoing success in our customer experience excellence index is a testament to that philosophy.

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