

Strategies and Tools for Delivering Great Customer Service



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*Strategies and Tools for Delivering
Great Customer Service*

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Introduction

We're all busy people, which is why the Small Business Success Library of books is a great way to get your hands on a lot of information; information that is vital to your business success, and all in easy bite-sized pieces.

We all demand first-rate customer service, but are we delivering it ourselves, or are we just getting by? Do you know what your customers think of you and your company? Do you know what they are saying about you, and are you certain that it would all be good? Do you know what it takes to keep them coming back, and referring their friends? Do you know what they need and want, and are you delivering on those needs, or just selling them stuff they don't need?

This first anthology in our customer service series opens with eight customer service strategies - things like how to make your customers feel important, exceeding customer expectations, how to recover from customer service mistakes, and even when it's time to fire a customer. It follows with a great 'cutting edge' customer service story that demonstrates how well it works when people really care about their customers, and continues with dozens of tips on how to make sure your customers keep coming back. We close with two highly valuable tools to put in your customer service toolkit - the Customer Needs Analysis and the Customer Survey.

Whether you want to learn ten key customer service principles, or ways to wow your customers and win their loyalty, heart and soul, this is the eBook for you.

Ingrid Vaughan

Business Writer



Customer Service Strategies

Anticipating Needs - The Key to Your Customer's Heart

Have you ever been in a relationship where the other person provided you with just what you needed before you even asked for it? Do you remember what that felt like? How it made you feel that person cared about you enough to know those small details and take care of them? Sometimes the key to your customer's heart lies not so much in giving them what they ask for, but in anticipating what they will need and giving it to them before they ask. Michael E. Gerber in his world-renowned book "The E-Myth Revisited" (which by the way should be required reading for ANYBODY who owns a small business), tells the story of how a little-known inn off the highway in the Pacific Northwest gave him one of the most memorable customer service experiences he'd ever had. When I read the story I wanted to jump in my car and drive there as quickly as possible so that I too could experience that kind of care. The book is worth the price just to read that story! Anyway, I don't have space to repeat Michael's story, but I will tell you one of my own that illustrates this point. The story takes up most of this article, but the message really is in the story. As you read it, think about how it makes you feel as a potential customer.

My job requires me to travel from time to time, and last fall I was spending a lot of time on the



road. Every night in a different city, a different hotel, a different restaurant, isn't as glamorous as some people might think. In fact, it's very tiring, predictable and often soulless. I arrived late one night at a hotel in Prince George, BC on the last night of my travels. When I checked in I went through the usual routine of giving my credit card, asking questions about locations of restaurants, the location of the conference room where I'd be meeting the next day, etc. While the front desk staff was friendly, my experience until that moment had been very ordinary. What happened next was what made this one of my most memorable customer service experiences.

I took the elevator up to the 7th floor and trudged down the hallway to my room. When I opened the door I immediately noticed something was different

from every other hotel I'd ever been in. The light was on, the room was warm, and there was music playing softly from the radio. I felt instantly calm, and at home. I had never noticed until that moment how much I hated walking into a cold dark hotel room, and fumbling for the light switch. I also knew that the first thing I did when I get into a room is turn on the heat and the TV. For me it lessened the lonely feel of the room. The radio playing immediately gave me a warm fuzzy feeling of not being alone.

I put down my bags and walked farther into the room. The bed sheets were turned over on one corner in an inviting manner, chocolate mints were carefully placed on the pillow, and a clean, crisp white housecoat was laid across the bed, in anticipation of my arrival. When I sat down on the bed, I noticed a large, chocolate chunk cookie wrapped on a plate beside my bed. I was already pleasantly overwhelmed, but my experience was not yet over. On the table beside the television was a large bucket filled with ice containing two bottles of water. Next to it was the room service menu, and a voucher for a free full breakfast in the restaurant the next morning.


Finally, when I entered the bathroom, I felt a cozy warmth under my toes in contrast to the cold tile floor I usually experienced. The hotel had heated bathroom floors, and the heat had been turned on in preparation for me.

I had not asked for any of these special touches. In fact, if you had asked me what I most needed in a hotel room I would not have even thought of any of those things. But someone had.

Someone else had recalled walking into a cold dark hotel room and made sure it wasn't going to happen to one of their customers. Someone else knew that after a long day of traveling, a cold bottle of water was more welcome than you could know, and that not having to walk down the halls looking

for the ice machine was a gift! Someone understood that traveling is expensive, and that a lovely breakfast I didn't have to pay for was something to look forward to. Someone else was like me, and preferred to have the sound of a friendly voice in a sterile room. Someone anticipated how nice it would feel to have a warm bathroom floor, and someone even knew how much I loved chocolate! I'll never forget that experience (which no other hotel has come close to repeating - even in large Canadian and American cities), and I figure if a hotel in a little town like Prince George can provide that kind of memorable experience, anyone can!

So what can you do to anticipate your customers' needs? Put yourself in their shoes. If you were shopping for tires, or a chiropractor, for coffee, or furniture, what would make the experience memorable for you? What needs might you have? What emotions might you be feeling as you go to make a large purchase? How might a company minimize your fears? What would make you feel appreciated and valued? Ask people you know about their most memorable customer service experiences and see whether you can replicate any of them. Look beyond the obvious and reach down to a deeper level.

If you direct your customer service efforts toward anticipating and meeting your customer's needs before he or she even knows they need them, I can guarantee greater success in your business. I can guarantee customer loyalty, and I can absolutely guarantee customer referrals. Can you imagine how many people I have referred to that hotel since my stay? Imagine how many hundreds of people are reading about it right now!! That kind of customer service is irresistible, and given how increasingly rare it is, will give you an enormous edge over any other competitor in your industry. I hope you're inspired to give your customers as memorable an experience as that little hotel in Prince George did for me! 

Ten Principles to Keep Your Clients Happy and Loyal!

There is an old adage that says your clients are your business. Anyone who runs a business knows how true this is. Without clients or customers, you wouldn't have a business. So how come some businesses have a hard time getting their customers to come back, while others have customers so loyal they wouldn't go anywhere else?

The key is proactively “wowing” your clients on a regular basis so they have no reason to go anywhere else, and every reason to be loyal to your business. If you're not “wowing” your clients, someone else will, and in today's consumer-oriented society people will turn with the wind to one of your competitors if you haven't given them a reason to stick with you. So what is it that builds loyalty in your customers? How can you keep them happy and coming back for more? Here are ten principles to keep in mind.

1. Make Sure You Measure

Have systems in place to measure everything you do. If you don't know how you're doing, how will you know if you need to improve? From cost-effective management to product price and client service, find ways to evaluate how you're doing business and you'll know quickly when and where changes need to be made to increase your productivity and client satisfaction.

2. Know What Your Clients Want

Don't know where to start your evaluation process? How about asking your clients? Nothing makes a customer feel more valued and appreciated than being asked what they want and then seeing those things being delivered. It's easy to assume you know what they want, but asking them is still the best way to find out. You may be surprised by the results. How do they really feel about the service or

product you deliver? How could you better serve them? Written questionnaires, personal interviews, evaluation forms, or simple telephone calls are useful tools to help you determine what your clients want, and will assist you in delivering those things.

3. Always Exceed Your Clients' Expectations

It is better to promise less and then exceed your clients' expectations, than to promise them the world and under-deliver. Be careful to promise only what you can deliver, but make every effort to exceed their expectations every time. My friend is fiercely loyal to a certain mechanic in town. He's not the cheapest, but every time she has her car repaired she finds it washed, vacuumed and shined up inside. She's paying for a repair, but she's getting an added value that has inspired her loyalty.

4. Remember the 80/20 Rule

Remember, 80% of your business will come from 20% of your customers. A successful business is 80% client-focused and 20% prospect-focused. Don't lose sight of this important fact and spend your time, money and energy nurturing the clients you already have.

5. Empower All of Your Staff to Deal With Clients

Nothing frustrates a customer more than calling with a problem, only to be told the person on the phone can't do anything for them. Every employee who answers your phone should be empowered to give the customer some level of satisfaction. Even a response like “I'll look into it right away and someone will get back to you before noon” satisfies the customer's desire to have something done without feeling like he's being put off.

6. Have a Proactive Customer Care Strategy

Your marketing strategy should include a continuous plan of customer care that has nothing to do with you and everything to do with your customers. Regular contact, client-focused seminars and events, gifts, invitations to social events, newsletters, open houses, and discounts, are just a few ways to focus on your customers. Do this and your clients will begin to develop the kind of loyalty that keeps them coming back.

7. Use Your Imagination to Stand Out in a Crowd

Remember when you were starting your business you had to come up with a USP that set you apart from everyone else? Use your imagination to come up with ways to make your business stand out again. Offer your customers a spring or fall discount, invite your best customers to a special event, or send a gift at Easter or Thanksgiving for instance. Connect your marketing with your product or service. Are you a realtor? Leave a package of flower seeds with your flyers. Do you sell a product? Have a local chocolatier create a mold of your product and leave it with every estimate or purchase. A bit of money, for the benefit of getting your clients to remember you, is worth the cost.

8. The Customer is Still Always Right

Ask any consumer and they'll tell you how hard it is to find good service. Few businesses are standing behind this principle. Be the business that always says YES. If you can do it, do it well. If you can't do it, find someone who can do it for them.

9. Old Fashioned Values Still Work

Showing politeness and respect is not a lost art. Last week I was at a department store looking for a specific cleaning product. When I located a clerk she rolled her eyes, pointed to where I had just been looking and said "Aisle 10". Across the street

at another store, I asked a clerk where I could find the same product. She smiled and made friendly small talk as she took me to the right aisle. Where do you think I'll shop from now on?

10. Establish a Strategy to Maintain Regular Contact

The more regular and frequent your contact with your clients, the more solid your relationship will become. Some ideas... Get your client's address or email and send them things you think might interest them about one of their hobbies, a relevant web site or a newspaper clipping. Distribute a monthly or quarterly newsletter. Fix problems quickly every time - don't let anyone fall through the cracks.

You're passionate about your business, and you want your customers to be passionate about it too. With a little imagination, creativity, and a commitment to caring for your customers in a way that will "wow" them, you can profit from the results. The extra effort it takes to "wow" your customers and set you apart from your competitors will result in long term, satisfying relationships with clients who will be loyal to your business and tell all their friends how great you are. "Wowing" your customers cements existing relationships and perpetuates new ones.

It's never too late to start. If you haven't had a great track record with customer care, what's to keep you from starting your "wow" program today? Customers are people who want to be respected and appreciated. These simple principles will take you a long way toward inspiring customer loyalty and increasing the profitability of your business. SBS

Exceeding Your Clients' Expectations



How to Create a “WIN” Every Time

I often teach a workshop on customer service, and one of the exercises I do at the beginning of the day is ask people to tell me about their worst customer service experience. You wouldn't believe how anxious people are to share their horror stories about bad service. The energy around the room gets pretty high as people commiserate with each other about their similar experiences, and always have one to top the previous story. Then, I ask them to tell me their most positive customer service experiences, and the mood changes right away. People tell their

positive stories with such enthusiasm they're almost glowing with the good news! Sadly however, there are always more bad stories than good ones. As a small business you have an opportunity to set yourself apart from the rest. You can create a “win” situation with every client, every day. If you can differentiate yourself from your competitors by exceeding your clients' expectations, they'll be talking about you all over town. Exceeding expectations isn't as simple as you might think. There are some key components to creating this kind of experience for your customers, and they require some work on your part before you even sell them anything.

Define Success With Your Client

How can you exceed expectations if you don't know what your customers expect? You can assume you know what they consider to be great service, but if you don't ask, how can you know for sure? Before you make the sale, ask your client to define their version of success. "Mr. Client, before I even show you the advertising rates for our magazine, I'd like to know what will make you feel as if purchasing this advertising is a good move, and will bring you success." One client might quote a percentage increase in sales, another might say it was an increase of traffic to their store. Another might even say that they'd feel successful if they heard people talking about their store - that is increased visibility in the community. If you don't know how each client defines success, you can't possibly meet or exceed their expectations. It's all about understanding needs.


Define Your Deliverables

The client begins thinking about success when you make your proposal. As you're talking about what you can do for them, how your product or service will benefit them, they're beginning to imagine what that would look like. If you promise to lasso the moon for them, they'll believe you can do it, and anything less than the moon on a platter will appear to them as a failure to deliver. The great news is that you're in control of those deliverables, and you can in fact, set your clients up for a big surprise when you over-deliver! Always present realistic, moderate deliverables, and then, go to the wall and deliver more than you promised. It works every time, and clients are thrilled that you not only gave them what you promised (which by their own definition equalled success), but that you gave them even more! If that doesn't get people talking about your business, nothing will.

Define Future Business

Nothing helps you to up-sell, resell, future-sell and get referrals like creating success for your client. Once you've over-delivered and your clients couldn't be happier with the way you've helped them grow their business, that's the time to create future business. Let's say Mr. Smith's advertising

campaign with your magazine was so successful he more than doubled the sales increase he'd hoped to achieve. You can then take it one step further. "I'm so thrilled that your ad campaign was so successful Mr. Smith. I think we made the perfect investment decision 3 months ago. I am looking into the future now and thinking that based on our previous success, we can increase the monthly investment by 25% to grow your business to the next level." Or, you could ask Mr. Smith, based on his success, whether he might have any colleagues or business associates who might also benefit from a similar ad campaign. Keeping an eye on their future, as well as yours, and building on your success with them creates a win/win situation for both of you.

Recognize the power you have to create a winning strategy with every client, every day. Meet and exceed expectations that you and they, together, have set, and there will be no end to the future business you can create. 



The Value of Customer Service Training for Your Staff



There was a time when customer service was exactly what it said it was. It seemed to be universally understood what was involved in making customers happy, and what it looked like to take good care of them. It's not that way anymore. You can't assume that people you hire or even those who already work for you, know what customer service means to you. Your customer service philosophy is something you should be imparting to your staff on an ongoing basis. This is the only way to ensure that your customers are getting the service you want them to have. Training

doesn't have to be onerous. It's really just about sharing your values and expectations with your staff. Here are some things to think about when training your staff on how to deliver the kind of service you expect for your customers.

1. Provide Goals and Expectations

What exactly do you want your staff to do to deliver your kind of service? How do you want them to behave – on the phone, behind the counter, on the floor? Your answer will be unique to your business,

the product or service you provide and the type of customers you serve. Regardless of the kind of business you have, you need to have a clear idea of the end results you're looking for. Employees need to have clear expectations; they need to know what success "looks like" and how you will be judging their customer service efforts. Be specific – don't assume your employees will know what you expect

2. Provide the Tools to Deliver on Your Expectations

Employees need tools, and they need to know how to use those tools to serve customers effectively. Have they been given the appropriate amount of training for adequate product knowledge? Do they have the right software or equipment to do what is expected? Do they have the authority to make decisions for the customer? Do they know what your policies and practices are with regard to satisfying customers and responding to complaints? The more flexibility you're able to offer and the more clearly you communicate these guidelines, the better able employees will be to meet customer needs. Customers benefit, too, when employees are able to resolve situations "on the spot" instead of having to "talk to my manager."

3. Provide Practical, Relatable Training

Your customer service training should be based on real life experiences – yours and those of others in your company or your industry. Use examples of things that have actually happened to help to highlight bad/good/better/best examples of working with clients and customers. Use your most successful people to assist you with training and coaching other employees. Use role-play to provide examples of how to deal with common challenging situations. Provide employees with an opportunity to "practice" their responses. When a real situation occurs they will have a higher comfort level with their ability to respond effectively.

4. Provide Opportunities for Shared Learning

Have everyone on the team involved in the training process. Ask them for their worst customer service experiences – allow them to tell the stories of how or why they didn't do very well because those situations are perfect for teaching. Ask your team, "What could John have done differently?" You need a good balance of both failure and success stories to build a strong service culture. Similarly, take time to celebrate your successes and to share these success examples with all employees. Sometimes the best "customer service training" for staff can be a good debriefing of either a positive or negative customer situation.

5. Lead by Example

Your staff watches not only how you interact with customers, but what you say about your customers. If you speak badly about customers or put them down with your words, this sends a very strong message to employees. It shows disrespect for your customers, and no matter what you say you want them to do, they are not likely to respect your customers any more than you do. Make sure you're being a strong role model - both in word and deed.

Gone are the days when you can hire someone in a customer service role and just assume they know what that looks like. If you really want your staff to deliver excellent service, you must take the time to show them what it means. Your customers will see the difference, and so will your business. SBS

7 Ways to Make Your Customers Feel Important

How many times have you spent your well-earned dollars on a product or service, only to feel like a number, or a commodity to the company once they've received payment? On the other hand, how well do you remember the companies that made you feel like they really valued you as a customer? It seems that the second scenario is becoming rarer, and those companies that do go the extra mile to make their customers feel important and valued, stand head and shoulders above the rest. Winning customer loyalty takes a lot of time and energy, which is why so many companies can't be bothered, but achieving it will give you a never-ending source of repeat business and referrals. How is your business doing in making your customers feel important? Here are some ways you can "wow" your customers.

Pay Attention

When dealing with your customers, take note of all the little things that may not seem important to the transaction at hand. Did Mr. Jones walk in with a limp and a cane today? Was Susan not her usual chatty self when she came in to pick up that part she ordered? When John came in, did you notice he had a new puppy in tow? Paying attention to the little details of everyday life, and letting your customers know you noticed, will make them feel valued.

Really Listen

Use what Stephen Covey calls Level 4 Listening – listening empathically. Not just for the content, or for how you will respond, but listening between the words you hear. Do you hear fear, reluctance, or excitement? When you really listen you can learn what your customers truly need, and meeting their needs is another way you can make them feel important.

Put Them First

Remember that most customers are thinking WIIFM (what's in it for me?). In all your interactions with customers, think about whether you're giving them the answer to that question. Do they know you care about what's important to them? What's in it for them has to come before what's in it for you, or the customer service equation doesn't work. I recently heard someone say, "people don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care."

Put Yourself in Their Shoes

So, that customer standing in front of you is angry about what they perceive is sub-standard service. It sounds outrageous to you, but to them it's very real. When faced with complaints or confrontation with your customers, put yourself in their shoes. Try to remember the last time you were unsatisfied with something you paid for. How did it feel? Were you acknowledged or dismissed by the company? How would you have liked to be treated? Stepping back from the situation and realizing every consumer is just like you, might help you to show a little more compassion and understanding in difficult situations.

Be Honest and Genuinely Open to Feedback

Criticism or complaints from your customers are actually your greatest customer service opportunities. When you know what you've done wrong, you can take steps to make it right. Be honest when you have made a mistake, and genuinely seek to rectify it. Throw defensiveness out the window, and take your customers' feedback to heart. It may sting, but it will take you to a greater level of customer service. Implement the things you hear from your customers, and thank them for the opportunity to be better at what you do.

Deal with Problems Quickly

Nothing is more irritating than having a problem with a business and getting the runaround, or worse, getting no attention at all. When a problem comes to your attention, deal with it immediately. This assures your customers that they are important to you. When you make the time to deal with their issues right away, you show that you value them. When you put it off, allowing weeks to go by without a word, you let them know that you don't care if they go somewhere else!


Be Creative in Showing Appreciation

Creativity takes effort, but taking those few moments each week to do something nice for your customers goes a long, long way to inspiring loyalty and making them feel special. You may need to add some money to your marketing budget, but the little you spend on showing

your appreciation will pay off huge dividends. The possibilities are only as limited as your imagination. Here are just a few ideas:

- Hold a customer appreciation event with free hot dogs and ice cream
- Send flowers to a long-time customer who's experienced a loss or is going through a difficult time
- Charge up \$20 on a few Starbucks cards and have a draw for two customers a month – just because you appreciate them
- Send a bottle of wine to a customer who made a large purchase
- Purchase two event tickets (sports or concert) and send them to a customer who gave a referral
- Have a weekly or monthly draw for a gift basket – customers can enter every time they make a purchase
- Send thank you cards for no other reason than to thank your customers for their loyalty



What's holding you back from making your customers feel important? These few simple steps can help you create a loyal customer base – and that's something solid to build a business on! 

Recovering From Customer Service Blunders

Every small business hopes to “wow” its customers to keep them loyal. While most businesses try their very best to practice good customer care, it’s inevitable that at some point they’ll make mistakes. How you handle these mistakes is as important as how you try to avoid making them. When you make a mistake with your customers (and note I said “when”, not “if”), be prepared to handle it in a way that will help you not only retain those customers, but also strengthen those customer relationships. Here are four things you should NEVER do when you drop the ball with your customers.

- 1 Customer Blaming** - Some businesses have a gift when it comes to somehow turning their mistakes into the customer’s fault. If you’ve ever experienced this, you’ll know just how ineffective this is.
- 2 Playing Dumb** - Pretend that you can’t imagine how such a thing could happen in your company, or worse, give your customer the impression that you don’t believe them, and you will send your customers running to the nearest competitor.
- 3 Giving the Runaround** - Assuring your clients you’ll take care of their problem while giving them the runaround and hoping they’ll get lost in the shuffle and forget about their issues, will get you nothing more than an angry customer. Rest assured all their friends will find out about your methods and will never darken the doors of your business.
- 4 Not Keeping Your Promises** – If you make promises to your customers and don’t follow through, they will eventually lose faith that your company will do anything it claims, and quickly move on.

There are positive ways you can salvage your client relationships when you blow it. In fact, mistakes provide you with an opportunity to turn those disgruntled customers into loyal ones. If you can make that happen, they’ll stay with you forever. Whether your mistake involved thousands of dollars or just a few, these principles will put you well on your way to establishing a reputation for integrity in business, something that’s becoming a rare commodity.

1. Simply Admit Your Mistake

Your customer doesn’t care that the delivery truck crashed on the way to the store, or that your supplier ran out of the paint colour they chose, or that your newly hired employee can’t count and messed up the billing. If you didn’t deliver on your product or service for any reason - it’s your fault. What happens in business may not always be within your control, but what is always within your control is the ability to do something to rectify the situation for your customer. Excuses are not an acceptable part of the equation, ever.

A friend of mine hired a communications company to create a promotional package for a new product line they were launching. The contract stated the marketing company would take care of the project from conception to press for a specific deadline, but once it got to the printer, there were all kinds of details that had been overlooked, requiring extra work to get it press-ready. My friend contacted the firm, and received an immediate apology and admission of the mistake, along with the assurance that they would spend whatever time was necessary to get the package ready to print. Because of the deadline, several people had to work through the weekend to get it ready, but by Monday they were able to print. In spite of their blunder, my friend hasn’t stopped talking about this company and recommends them to everyone who needs communications work done.

2. Always Do Something

You can always do something to make things right. Maybe it means ordering a part from a different supplier, or staying open late to accommodate your customer's schedule, or providing the product or service at a discount, or throwing in something free. Sometimes you can't make it right immediately - the specialty part you need can only come from a specific supplier and the item is back ordered - but there are things you can do in the interim to make your customer feel he or she is being valued until their situation can be resolved. Offer them a discount on the part once it arrives, give them a dollar amount off their next repair/purchase, or even send them to a competitor who can get them what they need quickly. A company that is willing to put their customers ahead of their profit will have their loyalty. If nothing else, it makes your customers more patient and willing to wait for the solution to their problem. People are very forgiving if they see you are doing your best for them.

3. Seek the Customer's Input


Most of the time your customers are more than willing to let you know how you can rectify a situation for them. Several months ago I purchased a used mini-van. Just my luck, the day after we bought it the sliding door came off the hinge. I took it to a body shop and asked them what it would cost to fix it. They quoted an hour of labour at their shop rate. I agreed and left the van. Later I picked it up, paid for the repair and went on my way. The next day, the door fell off again. I took it back to the body shop and they looked at it again, saying they saw a weakness they hadn't seen the day before and that it would take another couple of hours to fix it properly. The manager asked me what I wanted them to do. I told him I felt I'd paid for a job that wasn't done right the first time, and that I shouldn't have to pay any more to get it fixed. Without hesitation, he agreed to fix the door at no additional charge. He swallowed a few hours of labour, but gained my loyalty.

4. Go Beyond Making it Right

Your customers expect you to make it right for them, but when you go beyond making it right, you will win their trust and their business, and will reap the rewards of referrals to other potential customers. Don't just meet expectations, exceed them. It often doesn't take much. My coffee shop offers me a coupon for my next coffee free if I have to wait more than a few minutes for my beverage. It's a small gesture - they don't have to do it - but it keeps me coming back because I feel they value me and my time. When someone returns a defective item that's under warranty, give them a new item, but throw in a coupon for something free the next time they shop. If you're late on a repair that means your customer will have to wait an extra half hour, have coupons from the coffee shop across the street so they can grab coffee or a pastry while they wait. Your customers deserve to have their problem fixed, but when you throw in an added bonus that says "thanks for your patience, we really appreciate your business", you'll have them bragging about you all over town.

5. Honour Your Word

Integrity in business is something that is demonstrated over time, and it is shown by honouring your word. If you say you'll do something, do it. If you promise something, deliver it. If you can't do something, be honest about it. People will put up with a lot if they feel they're being treated fairly and honestly. Your integrity can't be bought, but it's invaluable to your business.

These five simple steps will help you to turn a potential disaster into a loyalty-building exercise. All of us make mistakes, but those who know how to turn their blunders into opportunities will outshine their competitors, be the talk of the town, and keep their customers coming back year after year. 

Five Customer Service Commandments

Someone once said to me, “business would be great if it wasn’t for the customers.” Sadly, that statement is all too often true. You’re in business because you’re passionate about what you do - and it’s hard to deal with people who don’t appreciate what you have to offer. It is however, also true that without customers, you wouldn’t have a business, and although there may be times you wish you could let them know what you’re really thinking, the best policy for dealing with your customers is to satisfy them, no matter what. Whether you or your staff are on the front lines, here are some customer service essentials.

Commandment 1 **Thou Shalt Always Put Live Customers Ahead of Phone Customers**

Have you ever stood in line at the service counter, got to the checkout, and then had the service person answer the phone and spend fifteen minutes answering another customer’s questions while you stood there feeling ignored and irritated? Live customers should always come before customers who telephone. To the customer, it feels as if someone from the end of the line has cut in front of them just as they reached the service desk. Politely ask callers if you can take their name and call them back when it’s less busy. Acknowledging and serving customers who are right in front of you will result in customers who feel they are valuable and important to you. They are customers who will return and continue to do business with you.

Commandment 2 **Thou Shalt Never Complain About Your Job in Front of Your Customers**

Last week I was shopping at a department store on a sale day. It was chaotic - people everywhere, clothing in heaps and piles, long line-ups for the change rooms - and most people were taking it all in stride. Customers were joking with each other in the line-up, asking each other for their opinions on clothing choices, and generally accepting the chaos as part of the cost of getting good deals. I can’t say the same for the young woman who was working the change room area that day. She was frustrated by the demands of customers, by the messes being left behind, and by the frantic nature of the day. She complained to another co-worker just loudly enough so everyone around her could hear, about how much she hated sale days, about how inconsiderate some customers were, and that they weren’t paying her enough to put up with the stuff she had to do. We’ve all experienced it - you’re standing at the grocery checkout when the cashier grumbles about not having had a break in four hours, or the parts & service guy at your service station complains to you that the company never orders enough parts. Customers don’t really care whether you think you’re getting paid enough, or that you feel you’re overworked or how you feel about the company; all they want is good service. Complaining about your job in front of customers is a major turn-off. If it happens too often, your customers will go where they are welcomed by people whose primary concern is providing them with the service they are paying for.

Commandment 3 **Thou Shalt Always Make Your Customers Feel Valued**


Doing the little things that make people feel special will win your customers over and make them loyal to you forever. The fact that my auto body shop always remembers my first name when I walk in the door, even if I've only used them once a year, makes me feel valued, and I keep using them for that reason. If I have to wait longer than a few minutes, the coffee shop I frequent lets me have a free coffee to thank me for my patience. That makes me feel that they value my time, and I keep going back. A friend of mind sent back a meal because it wasn't prepared the way she had ordered it, and the restaurant gave her a free dessert and coffee coupon. Needless to say, she'll be going back for dessert and coffee! It takes very little to make your customers feel special, so take the time to think of ways you can routinely do that. Businesses who do that rise to the top of the heap very quickly, and customers tell their friends about it so their referral business goes up as well. Always give some positive expression of what you CAN do.

Commandment 4 **Thou Shalt Be Courteous at All Times**

Customers deserve your courtesy at all times. Period. Whether you've had a bad day, a fight with your partner, forgot to pay your income tax, are mad at your best friend or whatever ails you, when the customer walks through the door they deserve your undivided attention and your best attitude. Courtesy includes things like saying 'please' and 'thank you', or using their name if you know it (or can find it on their credit card). "Thanks for shopping with us today Mrs. Jones." goes a long way toward making your customer feel valued. So does offering to go above and beyond. "How

would you like this packaged Mr. Smith?" "Is there anything I can add to this package today?" "Did you get our sale flyer in the mail? I wouldn't want you to miss out on that special offer - I'll put an extra one in your bag." Courtesy breeds loyalty. So put your best foot forward for your customers and reap the benefits.

Commandment 5 **Thou Shalt Demonstrate a Can-Do Attitude**

You should always be able to do something for your customer. The words "I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do," should never be part of your vocabulary. If they need something you can't provide, make sure you find them someone who can. "Can I phone the downtown store to see if they have one in stock?" "We don't sell those here, but I know that (Competitor) on Oak Street does. Perhaps you can find what you're looking for there." "I'm not authorized to offer a discount on that, but if you could come back in an hour when my supervisor is here, I'll pass your request on to him/her." If there genuinely is nothing you can do to make the customer happy, find a way to make it up to them. "I'm really sorry we couldn't help you today, but I'll give you a 5% discount on your next order to make up for it." Can-do companies have loyal customers. Make sure you demonstrate this attitude with yours. 

When It's Time to Fire a Customer

Termination Strategies for Getting Rid of Toxic Clients

If you've been in business for any length of time, you've likely had at least one - those clients who appear to be more trouble than their potential profit to your company. Always complaining, never happy, destructive, sometimes even abusive, and always toxic. Your staff hates dealing with them, and every time you see their number on call display, you let it go to the machine. They are demanding, demeaning, unappreciative, and miserable. So much so that you wonder why they keep coming back if they're so unhappy. And yet, they do. While it's obviously in a business's best interest to retain clients whenever possible, it's also a smart business strategy to realize when a client or customer is actually costing you money - or worse, costing you staff - and to consider "firing" that client.



The first and most difficult step is recognizing when that relationship needs to end. Some of the things that may lead you to that conclusion:

- The client doesn't respect or appreciate your work and verbally puts down your company or your staff
- The client makes excessive or unrealistic demands on your company and your staff
- Expectations about what they are willing to pay for your product or service are not reasonable - they want work done cheaply and under unrealistic deadlines
- They pay their bills slowly, or sometimes not at all
- They are always pushing you to the limit, taking advantage of you and your staff at every turn
- They verbally abuse your staff and bring a toxic, negative attitude whenever they engage with you
- They intimidate and challenge, and send your staff into fits of rage or tearful outbursts

Just like giving notice to a problem employee, if you've got a client who is causing havoc in your business, it's best to put them on notice rather than simply dropping them. This requires having a difficult conversation, in private. Outline what the issues are. They may be completely unaware of how their behaviour has impacted your business. Be specific about the things you need to see changed, and ask for their cooperation. "It's simply not acceptable for you to yell at my staff when you are unhappy. We treat each other with respect, and


we expect our clients to do the same.” Be sure to document these efforts so you can refer to them later, if necessary. If things don’t improve, schedule another meeting, reiterate your expectations, and advise the client that if things don’t improve, you may have to terminate the relationship.

If your attempts to improve the relationship don’t work, it may be time to move on and focus on more profitable clients or prospective clients. Of course, this may depend on the cash value of that client to your business. If they are a very large customer, you may need to put strategies into place to mitigate that loss. First, calculate what you stand to lose in gross revenue, and decide if your business can handle the financial hit (remember, sometimes there’s more to the picture than just the finances; what impact will it have on morale and your business culture and is it worth the potential loss?). If you can’t survive such a hit, you may need to put up with the current problem client until you can replace that client’s gross revenues with one or more new clients.

Once you’re in a position to let the client go, ask for a meeting with the client. Refer back to any previous meeting(s) you may have had and calmly and professionally, explain the situation, and review your efforts to correct the problems. Advise the client that you no longer wish to do business with them. Have a plan in place to make the transition as smooth as possible (perhaps refer them to someone else who may be able to serve them better). If the client has been difficult enough

to bring you to this point, you can expect a hostile reaction to this conversation. Remain professional and calm throughout the process, no matter how badly the client behaves, but be firm in your decision.

Also have a plan in place (and prepare your staff) for how to deal with the client if they keep coming back and disregard your effort to terminate the relationship. One would hope that legal efforts, such as a restraining order, would not be necessary, but it may be. Most people will not get to that point – they’ll take the hint and go elsewhere, happy to discredit you to others. This is also something you need to be prepared for, and train your staff in how to handle those kinds of comments from others. Remain professional in your responses. For example, “It just wasn’t a good fit for us to do business together.” Be careful how you speak about that person to others. Being brutally honest about how miserable they were might make you feel better, but it can backfire on you and make you look bad. The less information you give the better. It holds you and your business in higher esteem, and makes it look as if you took the high road.

It’s complicated. It’s difficult. But you’ll know when it’s right. Do your best to resolve your relationship challenges with a difficult customer, but if you’ve decided you need to terminate the relationship, trust yourself, prepare yourself and move forward with confidence that you are doing what’s best for your business. 

Customer Service Stories

A Cutting Edge Customer Service Story

One of the consumer trends that is rapidly gaining popularity is real-time customer service experiences. Consumers are doing this in a variety of ways – through Twitter conversations, Facebook entries, blogs, and even creating short videos uploaded to YouTube. You can get a first-hand customer review on almost any product or service you can imagine, without working very hard. Recently, I was browsing the Internet for reviews on a particular knife set I was interested in purchasing. I came across a video of a man talking about his experience with a particular knife company (not the one I was looking at, but it caught my attention anyway), and it turned me toward now investigating this other company. It was actually a story about a customer service experience, but I thought, any company that treats its customers like this must certainly have products worth investigating. Here's how the story went.

The man in the video (we'll call him Joe) ordered a set of knives from Company X through having heard about them on a radio campaign. These knives were manufactured in the UK and promised a 20-year warranty on sharpness and quality. He was very happy with the knives, however, a year



after his purchase he was cutting a piece of cheese, and the blade of the knife snapped from the handle and broke. He contacted the radio company that ran the campaign, and was told that Company X would contact him the next day. In fact, Company X did contact him by phone the next day, apologizing for the problem and advising him that several other customers had complained about the same problem, and that at some point during that year they had changed manufacturers and corrected the issue of the steel edge not going deep enough into the handle to prevent breakage. They told him they would send out a new knife. The next day, a courier delivered the new knife to his door. Inside the package was a hand-written note from someone at Company X, apologizing for the inconvenience and letting him

know how much he was valued as a customer. In less than 3 days, from another continent, Company X had responded to the problem and resolved the customer's issue to his complete satisfaction.

The point of this story is two-fold. First, the importance of real-time interviews for consumer reviews. This video drew me to the company's website in my search for excellent knives – a website I would never have gone to had I not heard about it through this testimonial. Second, it spoke to the impact customer service can have on consumer decisions. Here are some customer service principles demonstrated by this company that would be good to bear in mind as you think about how your company serves its customers.

Keep Your Word

Company X obviously gave the radio station that ran the campaign a 24 hour customer service promise – indicating that anyone who contacted them with a complaint would get a telephone call the next day. The radio station told this to the customers. We're used to being told that someone will get back to us soon, but are often surprised when they do. This company took their promise seriously and followed through.

Provide a Prompt Response to Customer Complaints


It's human nature not to want to deal with problems – and dealing with customer complaints is not on anyone's "top ten favorite things to do" list, but it should be! Customer complaints give your business an opportunity to shine. Given the time difference between the UK and North America, it would have been easy for Company X to use that as an excuse not to be prompt with their reply, but they returned that phone call as soon as it was possible. This made the customer feel valued and important.

Create a Quick Resolution to the Problem

Next day delivery of a replacement item is almost unheard of, yet Company X found a way to do it. No excuses, just a new product, free of charge. How often have you tried to return a defective item and by the time you're through you feel as if you've been through an inquisition? "What were you doing at the time to cause the break? How long have you had it? Were you using it properly at the time it broke? Was anyone else using it, and did they use it improperly to cause the break?" And on it goes. A company that moves swiftly to resolve customer complaints will always stand out in an ever-increasing service-deficient culture. In fact, your quick resolution may prompt one of your customers to post their story on YouTube, and some day someone may be writing an article about you!

Don't Underestimate the Power of the Personal Touch

In the video, Joe made a point of letting the viewer know that the note that came with the replacement knife had been hand-written. That was important to him. It showed him that someone had taken the time to address a note to him, and deal with him personally; again, a rarity these days. Do you take the time to make a personal connection with your customers when they have concerns or complaints? It may mean the difference between having them ranting about you or raving about you to all who will listen.

This little one-minute video had a big impact on me. Imagine what this kind of marketing could do for your business? Being aware of the media tools available to you as a business and using them as savvy marketing strategies is one lesson from this story, but it starts with being the kind of company that is committed to creating customer experiences worth talking about. 

A Customer Service Tale

Recognizing the Importance of Customer First Impressions

You walk into an electronics store looking for a specific piece of hardware for your stereo system. You spend a few minutes looking through the appropriate section but aren't sure exactly what you need. No one has come to your assistance, so you approach the young man at the counter. He is on the phone, on what is obviously a personal call. You stand at the counter for several minutes without being acknowledged. While you're patiently waiting you notice a bag of opened potato chips on the counter, with crumbs spilling out of the bag. You notice that the clerk has a large tear in the knee of his jeans, and that his shirt has a number of food stains on it. You try politely to interrupt his conversation and although he makes eye contact and nods his head, he does not finish his call. You look around to see if there is anyone else in the store who can help you, but it appears he's the only one.

You interrupt him again and this time, he says into the phone, "OK, gotta go. Somebody's here." He hangs up the phone and looks at you. "What can I do for you?" he says. You explain that you need a particular part for your stereo, but you're not sure which brand to get for your specific needs. He stares at you for a moment, and then says, "I don't know." Stunned, you try again by asking if there is anyone else in the store who could help you with this purchase. He says the manager is out for lunch and that he is the only other person on today. He doesn't offer any further assistance, so you ask if the manager might be able to help you, and when he/she would be back from lunch. He yawns, looks at his watch and tells you in a half hour, but that

it's possible the manager might do errands after lunch so in fact, he's not completely sure when he'll be back.

You ask whether there's anyone else at another store he could call to get the information. He rolls his eyes, sighs, picks up the phone, and dials the other store. "Hey Joe, yeah, this is Brian from ABC Mall. I got a guy in here looking for an xxx cable for his stereo. He doesn't know which one to get. Any ideas?" He gets off the phone and tells you that Joe isn't really sure either, but that you could try Brand X because it's usually pretty good and they don't get very many returns with it. You select the item and put it on the chip-laden counter to pay. You pay with your credit card, but when you look at the receipt you realize he has charged the wrong price. When you point it out to him, he seems exasperated with you and tells you he's not really sure how to do a refund on the overcharge. He asks if you can wait for his manager to return in order to fix the transaction.

How are you feeling about this store right now? How likely are you to shop there again? Dr. Carol Kinsey Gorman, keynote speaker, management consultant and business specialist says it takes the average person only seven seconds to make 11 impressions. Look back over the story and count the number of impressions or assumptions you have made about the store itself and the young man at the counter. It's true that a customer's first impression often makes or breaks their decision to buy from you, so as a business owner – you should know what that impression looks like. Knowledge is the key to changing things that could be driving customers away. Here are some tips on how to get a handle on those first impressions.

Retail Businesses or Businesses with Storefronts:

Do an honest walk-through. Come in to your business from the street on a day when it is busy. Look around. Is the store tidy and uncluttered? Is the music too loud (or too soft – just barely there)? Is your staff engaged with people? Do customers look like they are finding what they need or are they looking perplexed? Do customers generally look happy? Is your product arranged in a way that makes it easy for people to find what they are looking for? Is pricing clearly marked? Is your staff neatly dressed and looking professional? Are there personal items belonging to staff, like food packages or coffee cups, in sight anywhere? Try to perceive your business from a customer's perspective, and imagine the impressions they are getting of your store and your staff.

Hire a secret shopper. As objective as you try to be, you still can't distance yourself from it completely like someone who's never been there before. Find someone – a friend of a friend or relative who doesn't know you or your store. Ask them if they would take a half hour to come and give you their impressions of your store. Have them come at a time when you won't be there. This will tell you if the staff behaves differently when you aren't there. This may be an eye opener for you and it will provide you with some great information.

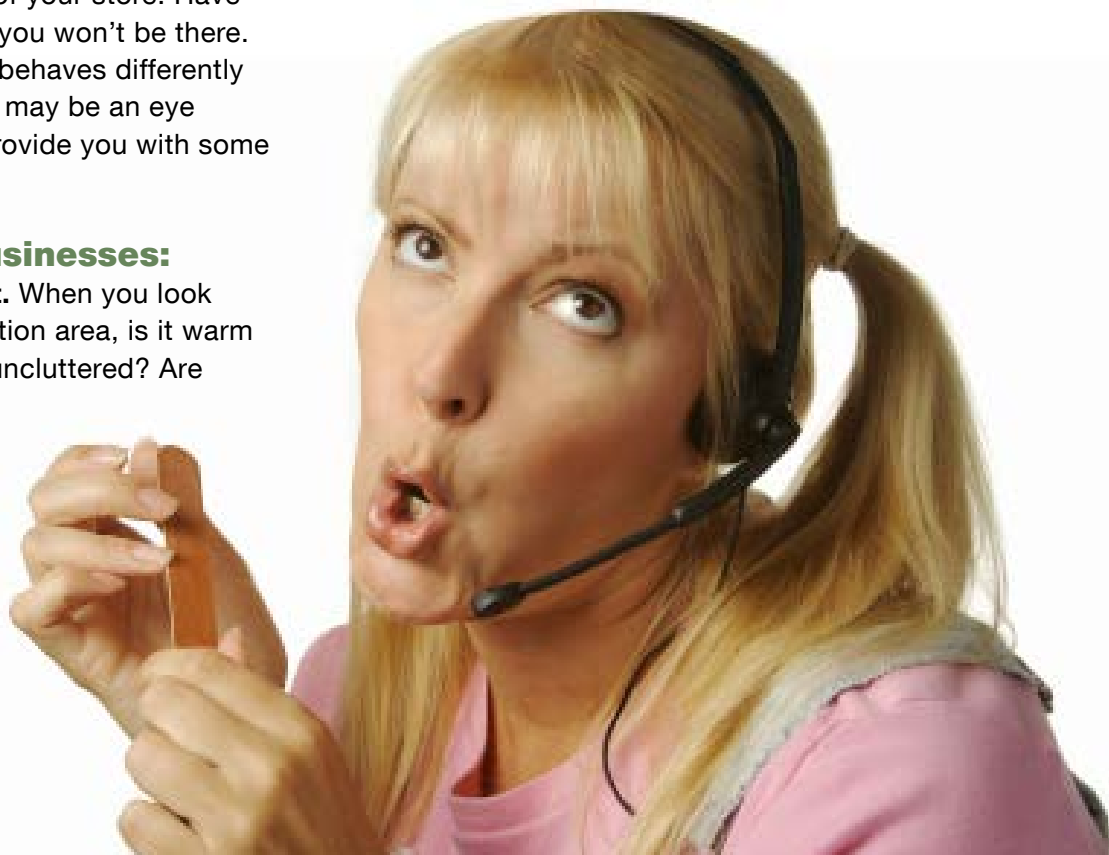
Service-oriented Businesses:

Do an honest assessment. When you look around your lobby or reception area, is it warm and inviting? Is it tidy and uncluttered? Are

there comfortable places for people to sit, and interesting things for them to read if they have to wait? Is your receptionist's desk also tidy and free of clutter? Listen to how customers are greeted and treated when they come in to your business. What are YOUR first impressions when you come in the door?

Do a client satisfaction survey. Ask the people who receive service from you, how they feel about it. Ask specifically about their first impression. Were they treated courteously? Did they have to wait very long? Did they receive the service they expected? Your best source of information is the people who have made their seven second assessment about your business.

Finally, whether you have a product or service-oriented business, train your staff on the importance of those first impressions. Read the story at the beginning of this article to them to make your point. If they understand the importance of that first encounter with your customers, they will more likely stay on their toes and try harder to make that first impression one that brings customers back. SBS



Customer Service Tools

The Client Needs Analysis (CNA)

A “Must-Have” Tool for Sales Success

How many times have you been sold something you didn't need by a sales executive who convinced you that you did? How many times have you bought something that you thought would meet your needs, but in the end it didn't? How often have you not received what you thought you paid for? All of these scenarios involve someone not taking the time to find out exactly what you needed, and matching their product or service to meet your needs. It's easy in sales to get so caught up in “making the sale”, that you forget who it's really about. Sure, in the short term making the sale feels really good. But in the long run, if your customer doesn't feel they got what they wanted or needed, they won't come back, and your short-term gain will have cost you a long-term customer. One of the best ways to determine what a client needs is to do a Customer or Client Needs Analysis (CNA). Not only does the CNA give you an accurate snapshot of your customers' needs, it really puts them at ease because they see you working hard to find out what's important to them.

Whether you sell to consumers or businesses, you can use the CNA to gather important information that will help you to assess your customers' needs. Here's an example of potential questions for a business client CNA:

History/Company Info

How did you get started in this business?

What is the greatest misconception people have about your company/product?

What are the most important things people should know about your company/product?

What are the benefits of buying from you?

Customers

Who are your best customers?

Why do they buy from you?

Where would you like to grow your customer base?

Sales and Events

What are the names and dates of your major sales events?

What are your two strongest events and why are they successful?

What are some unsuccessful events have you held in the past and why weren't they successful?

Market Position

Why do customers come to you and not your competitor?

What do you offer that competitors can't or won't?

What makes your business unique (your USP)?

Major Competitors

Who are your major competitors?

Why do customers go there?

What is their greatest competitive advantage?

What is your single greatest competitive advantage?

What is your single greatest competitive disadvantage?

Suppliers

What do you look for in a supplier?

Who are your favorite suppliers and why?

What is your reputation with your suppliers?

What problems have you had with suppliers in the past?

Overall Image

How would customers describe your overall image: i.e. low price, large inventory, good service, etc..?

How would you like customers to think of you?

What is the image you desire to portray?

Averages and Seasonality

What is your average sale?

How much does your company hope to gross this year?

What is your budget for (whatever you're selling)?

Marketing

What is the biggest marketing problem you face today?

What have you tried to accomplish with advertising?

I'm sure you can see the advantage of having the answers to all of these questions. At a glance you could quickly determine who they are, who their customers are, where they are strong, where they are weak, and how you might be able to meet their needs with your product or service. If these questions are too generic, create some of your own that are more customized to your industry. The point is gathering information so you can offer the best product or service for their needs.

If you sell to individual customers, you'll have to create a CNA that is customized to your industry or even your particular product. Let's say you own a car dealership. It could look something like this.

History

When was the last time you purchased a car?

How much did you spend?

How often do you purchase vehicles?

Do you usually purchase new or used?

What is your price range for a vehicle right now?

Preferences

What did you like about the best car you ever owned?

What have you liked least about cars you've owned?

What things factor in to your purchasing decision?

What is the most important factor in purchasing a vehicle right now?

What have you found to be the most frustrating thing about purchasing a vehicle?

Market Info


Why did you come to this dealership?

Where else have you shopped? What was your experience like?

Do you have any preferences in terms of make or model (i.e. are you looking specifically for a Toyota Camry)?

Who will be primarily driving and or riding in the vehicle (you may choose something different for someone who is teaching a new driver, and someone who is driving small children around)?

Can you imagine how different an experience it would be for someone to take you aside and ask you these important questions when you get to the dealership, as opposed to swallowing you up on the parking lot? The customer will immediately feel like you have their best interests at heart, rather than just trying to meet your monthly sales target. This builds trust, and we all know how important trust is in the sales relationship.

Be creative and use the CNA as a tool to really get to know your clients and customers. You'll be amazed at how powerful information is in making the right recommendations for them. And if you do, you can be sure they'll be back because you're the one who knows exactly what they need and will provide it for them! 

The Customer Service Survey

Your Greatest Tool for Meaningful Change

Recently, some friends and I frequented a downtown restaurant for dinner on a busy Saturday night. Although the place was packed, they found us a table right away. One member of our party had with him a special chair due to a back injury, and without a moment's hesitation or a strange look, they accommodated our special requirement. The service was polite and attentive without being overbearing. The server was knowledgeable about the menu items and able to recommend many things that she had tried herself. In spite of what was obviously a very busy evening the food was served quickly, and the menu items we chose were spectacular all around. Before we'd had a chance to order dessert, the server dropped four five-dollar-off certificates for our next visit to the restaurant onto the table. We ordered dessert and coffee, and were again pleased with the delicious items. When the server brought the bill, a brief survey about our experience at the restaurant was tucked into the leather folder. How do you think they fared on their survey?

When was the last time you were asked for your opinion? By your spouse, your kids, your employees? It feels pretty good doesn't it? Being asked for your opinion makes you feel valued and appreciated for your contribution to another person's life. Guess what – your customers feel the same way about your business! The customer service survey is an often underused but highly effective tool to bring about meaningful change to your business. After all, if you're not pleasing your customers, what's the point? So ask them what they think of you! If you're already providing great service you have nothing to fear, and will get some great testimonials for future marketing. If you're falling short in some areas, be grateful someone is



willing to tell you about them so that they can be rectified, ensuring better service in the future and increased loyalty and referrals from your customers.

There are many ways to go about this. You can create a simple survey yourself, hire a consultant to create one for you, or look online for samples or templates you could adapt to your specific industry. Here are a few principles to remember when creating your survey.

Keep it Simple

Make it as easy as possible for your customers to participate. Surveys should be relatively short (never more than two pages – one is even better) and easy to understand. People generally prefer multiple-choice questions over ones that require writing. Complicated grids or too many choices can also be overwhelming. Yes or no questions, or multiple-choice with no more than 5 options, work very well. Your language needs to be consumer-oriented, so be conscious not to use industry

jargon. These are customers, not suppliers or competitors. The easier your survey is to complete, the greater participation will be.

Know What You Want to Find Out – the More Specific the Better

Do you need information on how your front-line staff is dealing with customers, or do you want to know about product quality? Maybe you'd like to know how your service department is meeting your customers' needs. Perhaps you'd like their opinion on how your product or service is priced within the market. If you try to cover too much in a single survey it's bound to become too complicated or too long. It's better to create several specific surveys over the course of the year than to try to cram too much into one.

Always Ask the Most Important Question

Know what it is? "What can we do to improve our service to you?" Use some variation of this question at the end of every survey, because it allows customers to comment on the things that are really important to them, and that you may have missed with the questions you asked. Your survey may be about product quality, but if they've had a bad experience in your service department they're going to want to tell you about it. That question gives them permission to tell you whatever it is that they want. And believe me, they want to tell you – and you should want to know!


Keep the Promises You've Implied in Your Survey

If you ask a customer for their opinion on a specific aspect of your service, you're implying

that you really want to know, and that you plan to do something about it. If 50% of your customers tell you that Joe Smith in your parts department is rude and doesn't listen, but nothing happens to change Joe's behaviour, you're telling your customers that what they've said didn't really matter. Of course you may not be able to implement every single suggestion that is offered, but customers who take the time to answer your questions expect that you'll do something with the information they've shared. Look for patterns. If more than one person is commenting on the same thing it bears taking a serious look at. Don't ask questions about anything you aren't willing to look at changing.

Show Your Appreciation

Enter each survey participant's name in a prize draw, send a personal letter thanking them for their contribution, offer a discount coupon for their next service or purchase (like the restaurant did with us). Be creative in how you do it, but don't ignore this important step. Doesn't it feel good when someone thanks you for your opinion and lets you know how it impacted a decision they made? The same goes for your customers. If you are taking steps to improve some aspect of your business as a direct result of the survey responses, let them know. They'll feel important and appreciated; they'll never leave you for your competitor!

Where do you need to improve? What information is missing in your customer service plan? Ask the people who know – the ones who are spending money in your store or business, and you'll get meaningful information that will help you to improve your service, build customer loyalty and gain new customers. 

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