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RETAILING TONY GATTARI

Tips to keep you ahead

Communicate professionally: Customers today have access to more information than ever before. Customers can make product comparisons very easily. And most customers know what they are after even if they don't know how to articulate it. Customers don't expect to be coerced, bullied, tricked or intimidated into buying either. They don't expect to be treated like an 'idiot' or a 'sucker' by sales people who just talk at them and flash brochures or product sheets, looking for someone to boost their commissions. Nor, on the other hand, do they necessarily want to make 'friends' with sales people.

Customers expect to communicate and deal with a real professional who knows their own business and how they can best serve their customers' needs with creative solutions and fresh ideas.

Put the customer first: We're so driven to hitting our numbers that the person who gets overlooked all too often is the customer. And so a sales person's job is to do a lot less selling and a lot more helping people to buy. And in fact, one of the things that we see from the very best sales people and the very best entrepreneurs is when they discover the needs of these customers; sometimes they're not the best resource or they're not the best answer for those needs.

Then the best sales people in that bunch of entrepreneurs will find the match, even if it isn't in their company, and send that referral over to someone and then when it's their time and those customers come back to you and they don't even shop, they don't even look at anyone else.

Never be frightened of feedback: Never be frightened of feedback, no matter how negative it might be. There will always be a grain of truth that merits attention. In the

end, it is the customer who decides whether your product or service is any good and not the owner or manager of the business. It is always better to find out what the customer thinks rather than to pretend that you know what he or she thinks.

So, go for it; tell your customers that you can only fix the things you know about and get them to tell you about the things they want fixed.

Measure, measure, measure: Researching your customers may seem boring, but it is the only way you'll start making progress in the downturn.

You've just run an ad and an additional 100 people have come through the door on day one of the ad. Your marketing has worked — irrespective as to whether or not they have bought your product/service. You could easily have 100 people through the door and sell to one of them.

You don't have a marketing problem, you have a selling problem. Before you run the ad again, you'd better get up to speed with sales techniques, otherwise you're going to get the same results again and again. The marketing worked, you and/or staff didn't.

The flip side of this is when you have 10 people come through the door and you sell to eight of them. There's nothing wrong with your sales and service skills — but the marketing wasn't the most successful. Measure, measure, measure — so you know where to put your future marketing spend.

Count your chickens: Make sure that you are looking after your existing customers better than usual (if that is possible) because there'll be plenty of hungry competitors out there to do anything to steal them from you.

If you step up first, and raise service levels when everyone is talking doom and gloom, you're going to be a beacon in the dark, and attract both old and new customers alike. You'll also raise the bar so high your competitors will waste a lot of valuable resources trying to jump over it.

Explore new marketing methods: Marketing in its broadest sense encapsulates advertising, public relations, selling and distribution. It is basically the act of letting people know what you have to sell, where they can get it and what value it has. In order to grow a business, a business owner must be constantly looking at creating and putting in place new marketing methods in order to gain access to new prospects and customers for the business.

Deal with staff issues: Good employees are critical to the growth of any business, but more especially retailers. Therefore don't let staff issues remain unresolved. Take care of employees and develop them, making sure they are satisfied in their jobs and have the knowledge and resources to perform well. Employee loyalty is especially important in tough times when you want employees to achieve more — while pay rises might be out of reach, actively offer smaller rewards such as lunches, unqualified praise, training or mentoring. ●

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