



EXPERTS TONY GATTARI

FIVE STEPS TO SUPER CUSTOMER SERVICE

“If a customer has a problem, apologise and then fix it.”

You can use customer service as a powerful way to set yourself apart from your competition. It's one of the strengths a small business has and, by emphasising customer service, you can compete with larger companies that may offer more variety, lower prices, and other perks you can't afford.

But many small businesses fall short in customer service. Ignorance is one reason, because there simply are not a lot of examples of good customer service on which to model your company's efforts.

To make sure your business's customer service is top notch, find out what your competition is doing and then copy and exceed it. Read books or listen to audiotapes by people who have studied customer service-driven companies such as US department store Neiman Marcus and see what lessons you can learn from these giants. Successful entrepreneurs are always looking for ways to improve all aspects of their business and it doesn't hurt to model your behaviour on other successful organisations' efforts.

In the meantime, here are five maxims to help make sure you leverage your small business status to provide the best customer service possible.

Apologise, don't debate

If a customer has a problem, apologise and then fix it. Make sure you let customers vent their grievances, even if you are tempted to interrupt and correct them. Then give them a refund, a new item, or whatever will fix the problem. Debating or haggling over a refund creates ill will. Repair mistakes immediately. Keep in mind that a complaint about your company is an opportunity to turn the situation around and create a loyal customer. Obviously, there will be some customer requests that are too outrageous to comply with. If that's the case, do your best to offer a moderate, appealing alternative.

Use feedback to stay focused

Ask your customers to rate your service on a regular basis. This can be done via a short questionnaire included with every product sold or mailed to key clients. Keep the questionnaire short so that it is not a burden for customers to complete, and make sure they know they can decline to participate. Always let customers know that the purpose of the survey is to serve them better. If they fill out the survey and have no problems, it is a reminder of what good service you offer. If issues do arise, they can be addressed.

Some organisations ask customers if they would recommend them to a friend and say that a positive response means that customer becomes a 'promoter'. If 80 per cent or more of customers become promoters, it is held to be a leading indicator of strong growth prospects.

Stay flexible

You must be flexible when it comes to your customers and clients. This means doing a project for a client in a pinch, having an early morning meeting even if you like to sleep in, and meeting on Saturday even if you usually reserve your weekends for yourself.

Flexibility can also mean getting information for your client, even though it may not be in your area of expertise. Say, for example, you're catering a wedding and your client needs information on Irish wedding customs. It's just as easy to make a call to your local library and fax the information to your client as it is to tell them that you don't know anything about the topic. And making that extra effort will ultimately pay off with a very satisfied customer.

Always say yes

Always saying yes doesn't mean giving up your personal will to your customers, but it does mean finding a way to help customers with their requests. If you run a gift business, you might wrap a present for an important client, even if you don't usually provide gift wrapping. You might stay up late to finish a project if a client suddenly has a deadline moved up, or travel in a snow storm to meet a client even if it means an unpleasant trip for you. Always saying 'yes' means that the words 'that isn't possible' should be forbidden from use in your business. You cannot afford to use them. If this sounds expensive and inconvenient, it is, but it is less expensive than losing a customer and having to spend money and time landing a new one.

Under-promise, over-deliver

Make your customers believe they are important to you by always appearing to go the extra mile. Build a little cushion into a deadline and deliver early. Estimate that a job will cost more than you think, and bring it in lower.

Many small businesses make the mistake of reversing this maxim — over-promising and under-delivering. This is a true recipe for disaster. You may get the business, but your level of service will make it difficult to compete. If a 24-hour turnaround is considered excellent service in your industry, don't promise to deliver in 12 just because the customer requests it. ■

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