

What Customers Really Want

“R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Find out what it means to me.”

Although Aretha Franklin was referring to relationships when she sang these words, they relate to the business world – more so now than ever before.

Although respect means something different to most people, there is one certainty – good customer service is at the heart of it. Here are four strategies you can use to keep your customers coming back:

1. Under promise, over deliver. Although this seems fundamentally simple, the consistent execution is challenging. In our haste to please people and close sales, we often make promises we can't keep. We tell a customer we will deliver by 3:00 P.M. forgetting that we made a similar commitment to several other people. We promise to return a call by the end of the day but get caught up in other tasks and forget. Or, a salesperson tells a client that a back-ordered product will be available on a certain day without first confirming this. These situations end up causing us stress and strain the relationships we have developed with our customers. Avoid these types of problems by thinking through your decision before you make a commitment.

2. Hire the right people. My wife and I recently shopped at a local supermarket. The cashier smiled and struck up a conversation with us as she rang through our order. Another cashier who was not busy stepped over to bag our order and also smiled and talked to us. There was a friendly energy in the store and as we left, my wife said, “That is why I shop here.”

In addition to creating a good working environment, the management team also hired the right people. Front line staff have a tremendous impact on your business. But many managers make the mistake of focusing strictly on technical skills when they interview and hire new employees. Invest the time to hire individuals who have excellent interpersonal skills and who can relate well to other people. Ask questions such as;

“Tell me about a difficult customer problem you have had to deal with in the past.”

“What would you do if you were faced with this situation...?”

“Have you ever had a customer yell at you? How did you respond?”

You can always teach someone the technical aspect of a job. However, you cannot teach someone to have the right attitude.

3. Proactive communication. I once ordered furniture from a national chain and was told it would be delivered on a certain day – it was on back order at the time I made the purchase. I called the company the day before the furniture was to be delivered only to be told that it was still on back order. Had I not made the call, I would not have discovered this until the next day – when my furniture would not have been delivered. It would have been simple for the company to notify me and preempt my frustration.

In another situation, I was told a service person would drop by my home by 1:00 P.M. on a particular day to give me an estimate on a repair. Two hours **after** the scheduled appointment, I received a call telling me that he would not be able to drop by until the next day. As a result, I wasted two hours of my time waiting for him.

When things go wrong, and in business they often do, it is how you respond that makes a difference. Don't make your customer call you, call them instead. A small local repair shop makes this their policy. When a customer brings an item in for service, they give that person an approximate time frame when the product will be ready. Then they tell the customer, "We will call you when it is fixed so you don't have to waste your time checking with us." It is little wonder this business continues to flourish even in a challenging economy.

4. When you make a mistake, apologize. Most people can accept mistakes, providing they are treated with respect afterwards. This past summer I was inconvenienced on several occasions by different businesses, yet not one bothered to extend an apology to me. In each situation, an apology would have quickly and easily remedied the problem. However, their lack of concern to the problem – which was caused by the organization itself – caused me to stop doing business with each company.

Competition is fierce in every industry. Yet, it is very easy to differentiate yourself from your competition by showing your customers respect. This behaviour starts at the top, with you, the owner or manager. The leader of the business must treat both his customers and employees with respect if he expects his team to take care of the customers. Companies that treat customers with respect will always thrive, as long as they provide a good product or service at a competitive price.

Respect your customers' time, feelings, opinions, beliefs, and business and they will respect you.

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