

## From Jim Sirbasku's Desk *How to Keep the Customers You Have*

If anything strikes fear in the heart of a business owner who is proud of his company's customer service, it's the unhappy customer telling others how displeased he is. The old adage was that one person upset by Company X's treatment told an average of eight to ten friends. Then those people told even more, and before long, maybe one hundred people knew of the bad experience at Company X.

Now, one unhappy person can tell hundreds, thousands, millions or more people just by typing his tale into a blog or a broadcast e-mail and pressing send. Soon the tale, fair or not, is on its way around the world! If the old eight to ten figure gave you chills, the eight to 10 million is likely to knock you off your feet. If your company truly values great customer service and backs it up with actions, then you have a good foundation to survive the occasional dissatisfied customer. Loyal customers will forgive a stumble if you quickly put it right. But if you treat the mistake casually or repeat it, your most solid supporters are likely to remind you that they have choices, and take their money elsewhere.

Given that the cost of acquiring each new customer is ten times the cost of keeping the ones you already have, you need to get out the polishing cloth and burnish the skills of everyone in the organization. That's right – everyone. The customer sees you as Company X, not just a loose collection of departments under the same roof. If one department errs, it's Company X's responsibility to correct the error as quickly as possible. That means no telephone tag, no sending the customer from person to person, no shoulder shrugging and no instructions to the customer that begin with, *"You will have to"* or *"You need to"*.

Because you know the actions that drive customers away, emphasizing to

employees the behaviors and qualities that keep your loyal clientele returning is a positive step you can take. A wise manager will observe his employees at work and ask his customers often what they like and how to improve. Some of these will pertain only to certain businesses, but many customer answers are universal, and here is a sampling from various surveys:

- **Customers want knowledgeable, helpful staff.** This means employees must know both the product and the company well. Your goal is to build trust and credibility in the workers as well as the rest of what you sell. If someone likes your brand of appliances but your service or delivery department has a poor reputation for timeliness, your whole company is operating at a disadvantage.

- **Customers want flexibility.** If a loyal customer needs help now, not tomorrow or the next day, what can you offer him? Do you know your customers by name – well enough to know their special needs, and do you listen when they have a problem? Or do you operate by a rigid set of one-size-fits-all rules?

- **Customers want to feel they are getting an item equal in value to the price they paid.** If you sold an expensive product that doesn't hold up under normal conditions, your customer will likely feel cheated. If she brings the product back for a refund, you might have to swallow the loss. But you will have gained a customer for life, and probably learned an important lesson about the product – and maybe about your vendor, depending on what he does about the product.

**Convenience.** Are you easy to find in the phone book? If someone wants to visit your store, is your address clearly visible from the street? Is your parking lot cramped and always full, or is parking always available? If customers dial your number, will they talk to a real person? If you use an automated phone system, is it clear and easy to operate? (continued)

**Help when you need it.** Twenty-four hour service is only good if it's actually 24 hours. Don't promise more than you are willing to deliver. If you prefer not to have someone answering the phone at ten at night and seven in the morning, or on weekends, don't advertise 24-hour service. Don't put phone customers on hold for "a minute" that stretches into five, then seven, then more. If researching the issue will take longer than a minute or two, offer to call the customer back the same day.

This customer wish list is deceptively simple. Just because it makes sense does not mean every worker agrees with it and does everything on it. Good leaders will state specifically what they want – but that's only half of the job. The next step is hiring people who buy into your organization's values and training them continually to deliver what your customers want. Monitoring customer service behavior throughout the organization and correcting missteps quickly are always good ideas.

The excellent customer service you offer may mean you are soon worrying about another kind of math – so many happy customers telling so many others about you that you and your workers *almost* can't keep up with demand.

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