



Small business: Good customer service is Key

Customer service tips for small businesses

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In today's commodity-filled marketplace, oftentimes the only characteristic that differentiates one company from the next is customer service.

In many cases, it can even help a small business level the playing field when it comes to taking on larger competitors.

That's why it's important to make sure you're delivering the best customer service possible, and that starts with knowing what your customers want and then exceeding those expectations, say experts.

"If all you do is satisfy your customers, that's not enough," explains Randi Busse, president of Workforce Development Group Inc., an Amityville-based customer service coaching and training firm. "A satisfied customer is a former customer waiting to happen."

Simply put, there's too much competition out there to just do enough to get by.

"You want to provide your customers with a total experience over time that makes them want to keep coming back," says Martha Rogers of Peppers & Rogers Group, a [Norwalk](#), Conn.-based customer strategy consulting firm. "Random acts of kindness are not nearly enough."

You want to build a long-term relationship with your customers, and that means learning and remembering their likes and dislikes so they don't have to keep telling you what they want, adds Rogers, co-author of "Rules to Break & Laws to Follow: How Your Business Can Beat the Crisis of Short-Termism" (Wiley; \$29.95).

"Oftentimes, a small business will have no process or structured way to remember what customers are telling them," explains Kevin Stirtz, a professional customer service speaker and trainer and owner of the Stirtz Group Llc in Burnsville, Minn.

To be sure, you don't need a complicated system to help keep track, he says, recalling a paint store in the Virgin Islands that used recipe cards to catalog customer information.

The point is, small businesses have so much personal contact with their customers, they need to use that to their advantage, says Stirtz.

Take opportunities to talk to customers and ask them how your customer service is, advises Michael Crom, executive vice president for Dale Carnegie Training in Hauppauge.

"The most effective way to make certain that you're offering satisfactory customary service is by ensuring that customers always have the opportunity to provide honest, anonymous feedback," he says. "The key here is to allow feedback to be given at any point, not just through polling or questionnaires distributed at times dictated by the company itself."

Highly visible customer service telephone numbers, mail-in or drop-box survey cards and feedback forms on your Web site are all good options, notes Crom.

Doing some of your own digging doesn't hurt either, says Rogers. For instance, have a friend call your company with a problem and see how fast it's resolved.

"In many cases, if a business owner knew how their employees were treating their customers, they would cringe," says Busse. "It's the business owner's responsibility to educate employees on how they want their customers treated."

Training is very important, agrees David Friedfeld, president of ClearVision Optical, an eyewear distributor in Hauppauge.

"Every employee is responsible for customer service," notes Friedfeld, adding that ClearVision has its own on-site "training university" that tries to provide each employee 100 hours of training annually, part of it in customer service.

The company also consistently asks customers for feedback, says Friedfeld, noting that, among its efforts, ClearVision mails out a survey every 60 days to about 10,000 customers.

Feedback like this is important, as are the basics, such as being polite, smiling and giving customers your full attention, adds Busse.

"Meet customers enthusiastically," she notes, adding that you should avoid arguments at all costs. Perhaps you can't give a customer exactly what he or she wants, but offer a reasonable concession.

"Rule number one, the customer is always right," says Busse. "If you think otherwise, read rule number one again."

CUSTOMER SERVICE TIPS

Empower employees to deal with individual situations as they arise, says Martha Rogers. Customers don't want to hear an employee can't handle their needs because their supervisor is at lunch, etc.

Don't forgo the latest technologies, notes Michael Crom. Sticking with an old method of doing business can be fatal.

Treat your employees with the utmost respect and appreciation, he adds. Customers will sense employee loyalty and your business will prosper because of it.