

NOW, THAT'S SERVICE: Addressing Customers' Expanding Requirements

What's it worth to you? This dual-edged question could hold the key to strengthening your customer base. Perhaps never before has the perception of value meant so much in the marketplace. Because of the capacity to gain and lose business instantly, profitability and longevity are highly dependent on direct contact and appeal. So, getting a solid read on how prospects and current customers look at non-negotiables and perks is vital to differentiating your company from the pack.

Fashioning an organization that focuses outward entails planning, analysis and execution, revolving around four key elements: *knowing industry and product details, highlighting value points, boosting intangibles, and soliciting feedback.* For those who aim to shine, there's no such thing as having enough knowledge, no matter the economic climate. Routinely, entrepreneurial stars attest to the wisdom of staying in the know. They thrive on updating information, tweaking processes, revamping procedures, and upgrading training. Even if your industry doesn't mandate a recertification process, periodically honing your skills adds to your reputation for excellence. So does making it apparent that you and your team monitor pertinent industrial news, regulations, and legislation.

Given standard marketing practices, highlighting value points might seem like a no-brainer. However, doing so with an emphasis on relativity can be a huge impression plus. Rather than contentedly rattling off your menu of offerings, customize your pitches as much as possible. Starting with a general target profile, do a quick prospect study to help clarify needs and preferences. And when going after repeat sales, heightening your awareness of buyer likes and dislikes can give you an edge. Just be sure to acknowledge what you've noticed when discussing purchase options. Also, always bear in mind how both market and customer circumstances can and do influence decisions.

Boosting intangibles can significantly propel a company towards greater success. Since flexibility is a major business intangible, building it into as many phases of operations as possible is essential. Perhaps nothing endears a vendor to a purchaser quite like anticipation and responsiveness, the cornerstones of adaptability. Although they're at opposite ends of the service continuum, both of these competencies signal foresight and concern. And customers not only want such care, but especially in a tough market, it's what they require. The payoff for excelling in these areas is not limited to greater receipts. Gaining and maintaining advocates eager to offer testimonials is a priceless dividend as well.

"*Tough Times Call for Lean Customer Data*" (*Marketing* - 5/27/09) discusses how spending time talking with

customers helps you understand the experience they're after. Getting clear pre- and post-sale feedback facilitates the right fit. Knowing that customers clearly hold the key to any vehicle designed to deliver satisfaction, the most successful organizations invest intensively in a variety of feedback mechanisms. In addition to the data harvested from high-tech customer relationship management (CRM) systems, some of the most useful tidbits come from casual conversations. Therefore, engage customers; ask open-ended questions, such as "Why are you interested in/did you buy this product?" "Is there anything you'd like to see changed?" If so, how?"

In such a fast-paced world, it's easy to feel overlooked or forgotten. So, many customers find it flattering to have their input sought. And even for those who shun inquiries and surveys, at least knowing that a company has a feedback system in place can be reassuring. Especially when offered the opportunity to air a complaint, buyers sense sincerity and trustworthiness. Businesses that make grievance platforms readily accessible fare better in the long run than those that feel threatened by soliciting critiques. In fact, not being heard ranks high on the irritant lists of dissatisfied purchasers and end users. Likewise, being ignored or treated patronizingly accelerates customer relationship erosion, sometimes beyond repair. In "*Serving Aces*" (*Restaurants and Institutions* - 5/1/09), Philip Mott, assistant professor at Kendall College's Les Roches School of Hospitality Management, highlights the philosophy that it's better to resolve complaints immediately than to wait or not be aware of them at all. He says, "We are realizing complaints are good. It's a big deal now, and it's a fundamental change."

Showing a consistent desire to exceed expectations can distinguish a business in a challenging economy. In "*When Marketing Merges with Learning, Customers Profit*" (*T + D* - 6/09), Sam Herring, executive vice president of Intrepid Learning Solutions, notes the importance of stretching to meet the customer. He emphasizes that with extending and deepening relationships as a priority, companies must "think creatively to offer valuable, differentiated services that build long-term customer loyalty." That's why shaping a brand around not only stellar offerings but also superior service is important.

Both cash-strapped and time-crunched prospects prize customer-centered operations. Genuinely showing them that their patronage matters presses a loyalty button in ways that even the best product quality cannot.