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Customer Experiences Should Teach Us All



By Carolyn West Price

Not a day goes by that I am not amazed by how companies can remain in business with such poor customer service. These companies spend thousands and thousands of dollars on marketing to become household names, and many

spend time and energy training their employees on the right way to greet clients and sell to clients.

But, very few seem to invest any training in good service, post-sale follow-up or problem solving.

Yet, we all know a dissatisfied customer will most definitely spend energy and time telling many others about the horrible experience.

So, what is the call to action for all of us business owners, based on our awareness of the impact of word-of-mouth marketing? It's getting customer talking for the right reasons, rather than giving them something to complain about.

Here are a few tips to get you started.

- Walk in the customer's shoes. Start with the basics—call in one day and see how your call is handled. Ask for some assistance or information. Evaluate how it's handled. Email through your website for more information. How fast is the response? How professional? (By the way, what do you do with those leads?)

If your company is small and you will be recognized, get a trusted friend to do this for you and ask for complete candor in his or her evaluation. Hire a mystery shopper if you are really serious.

- Evaluate your attrition. Do customers come back on a repeated basis or are you

a one-shot wonder even if repeat business could be done? If you lose a lot of customers after their first or second encounter with your company, start trouble-shooting by asking for their feedback. Just as companies often interview employees who resign, you can interview customers. At least they'll know you care.

- Examine your problem-resolution/return policy. Do you offer a satisfaction guarantee? If so, that is often a marketing advantage, since it takes the risk of buying from you out of the evaluation process. If you don't, then consider it. Additionally, mystery shop this process as well. This is where many companies fall apart.

Here are a couple of scenarios that have happened recently, which can serve as valuable lessons for us all.

A company that has no phone number on their website (a major no-no) and cannot be found through yellowbook.com would not respond to emails about a problem with a \$100 product. Being unavailable for a customer is just bad business.

The same company sent an e-mail newsletter to its customer list. The newsletter provided a link to unsubscribe. Given the opportunity to actually reach the company, a note was emailed asking it to discontinue emailing the newsletter because there would be no future business, given its lack of response to the problem a year earlier.

Unbelievably, the company responded with an email that simply said, "Wow. We will take you off our list." There was no attempt to even learn about the problem.

How does such a company remain in business?

Another scenario, involving much more money, is even more appalling. A Howard County-based mover promised a smooth

move for the contents of an entire home—all in one truck that was slated to arrive on an agreed-upon date.

Instead, they split the contents into two trucks several weeks apart and would never respond to phone calls to confirm the date of the second truck's departure and arrival, so the local customs office could be notified.

The contact (an officer in the company), who had no problems processing the credit card payment for thousands of dollars, was initially "out of the office." Then, he was "sick." Then, he was "unavailable." No one on the local staff helped either, so calling the international corporate office to do some computer checking was the only option.

The local office has never called back or done a follow-up call, despite what seemed like "warm fuzzies" when we signed the contract. And, the corporate office, which was apprised of the situation, made no attempt at follow-up or even to send a note of apology.

Sound familiar? We all have our war stories that amaze us and leave us to choose other vendors for future service. But, what do we learn from these to improve our own businesses?

The bottom line is to put yourself in the shoes of the customer and "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." By all means, be proactive in training for problem resolution and follow-up after service, even if it's just a short thank-you note.

Most people are reasonable and understand that even the best systems can fail. If human beings act like they care, most of us are forgiving and will likely even give the company a second chance.

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