

Job #1: Customer Service

Keeping your customers happy is probably the most important job your company has.

If customers feel good about your company and the products or services it provides, they will not only be less inclined to switch suppliers, they will be more inclined to increase the amount of business they do with you. In today's hyper-competitive marketplace, keeping customers happy requires more than just "doing your job." You must make customers feel that they are getting what they paid for, and more. And you must avoid becoming complacent and taking customers for granted.

The basic truth in business is that it's repeat business, from faithful customers, that builds your profit. We have all heard that, statistically, it's much easier to keep a customer and sell other products and services to that customer than it is to gain new customers.

Here are five tips on providing outstanding customer service to generate new and repeat business:

1. Sell an honest product or service that you believe in.
2. Guarantee customer satisfaction and stand by your guarantee.
3. Make it easy for your customers to contact you with questions or concerns.
4. Take seriously your customer's comments, concerns or questions about your product or service.
5. Solicit your customers' opinion about your product or service and encourage them to be honest!

If your business is a customer service driven business, it will be apparent throughout the sales and service process with every customer. While many business people understand that they need to provide a quality product or service, they need to remember that customers care just as much about

service as quality. You must provide both to keep your customers coming back.

The customer is always right, but making the customer consistently happy means much more. Simply producing the best product isn't necessarily enough if you don't know what your customers are really thinking.

Keeping the customer happy demands different things of product businesses than it does of service businesses. Product businesses often have intermediaries between them and their customers -- distributors, reps, and others. Service companies, though, are usually in direct contact with customers and must pay attention to them to survive. Owners of both such companies must devise ways to inquire of customer reactions and feelings about company operations.

One sure sign that you have a problem with customers is if you don't get repeat business. Unfortunately, this sign comes too late to resolve. So it's important to pick up other signs earlier. Here are some suggestions for keeping tabs on customers:

- √ Use every device you can to determine customer reactions and feelings about your company's product or service. Quiz customers directly, and quiz your sales and service people and your distributors as well. Find out what customers think about your offerings, and what they think of the competition. Try short written surveys and consider offering some small gift or sample product to encourage responses.
- √ Managers should go out on sales calls. They can go alone or with salespeople. In the latter case, simply sit on the sidelines and listen. You'll often be amazed at what you hear being said between the lines -- about what customers think of you and what they think of competitors.

- √ Use samples as a way to initiate a smooth relationship with customers. Those who buy based on having tried a sample are much more inclined to be satisfied and feel the product met their needs.
- √ Use after-market service judiciously. While you should be able to make money on such a service, many customers resent paying for follow-on service. A solution: Build the cost of such service into the product's price structure so you can make service available at seemingly nominal rates.
- √ The farther you are from the ultimate customers in the distribution cycle, the more innovative and persistent you must be to stay in touch with them.

Nationwide studies show dissatisfied customers fail to make their complaints known to management in 50% of all cases. When customers do complain, only half are satisfied by the company's response. Because dissatisfied customers talk to as many as eight acquaintances and friends about their negative experience, a business can be losing sales--yet not understand why.

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