

Business Basics: Take Care of Your Customers!

By Richard Jarman

The cable TV service in my area recently changed from one big, impersonal company to another. The new company launched a multi-million dollar ad campaign to assure all of us that they were committed to giving us a new level of service. Unfortunately, they didn't tell us that new level of service was actually lower than what we had before. After enduring several weeks of dropped channels and fewer choices, I called Giant Cable Company to register my complaint with the service.

The guy who answered the phone seemed pleasant enough. He just couldn't fix anything. All he did was apologize for my inconvenience. He assured me that Giant Cable Company would soon make everything better. (I don't think he believed that any more than I did.) I got the distinct impression that my concerns weren't all that important to Giant Cable Company. I hung up the phone thinking, I wonder if they would care if I switched to satellite TV?

Apparently, I'm not alone in that feeling. The Rockefeller Foundation study showed that 68 per cent of customers who stopped doing business with a company did so for one reason: they felt like that company didn't care about them. One commenter on my blog summed up what many of us believe. She said that doing business today was "very similar to a visit to the carnival...with less than honest people trying to separate [me] from [my] money for little or nothing in return."

In an environment like this, when many people believe that no company cares about them, it should be easy to make a big impression on your customers. If you show your customers that you care, your company will shine. You might even attract some of your competitors' customers!

How do you build a culture of customer care in your company? It's really not hard, but it takes consistent commitment. Here are five ideas that will get you started as you build a customer-focused business.

1. Make customer satisfaction a company-wide goal, not just a slogan. It's easy to say the right things in your ads, but customers expect you to deliver in real life. Delivering a great product or service, on time, at a fair price, tells your customer that you value them. It sounds simple, but how many times in your experience has a business you've dealt with dropped the ball in one of these areas?
2. Ask your customers what they want. In a survey done by RightNow Technologies, customers most often cited poor customer service as the reason they left. But companies believed that price was the biggest reason customers left. That shows that many companies are making bad guesses about what customers think is important. Find out what your customers think. Send a satisfaction survey to your top customers. Encourage

them to give honest opinions about your products and services. You might be surprised by the answers you get!

3. Give special attention to your best customers. It's true: you'll get 80% of your business from 20% of your customers. Get to know these customers: their business, their people, their future plans. Acknowledge when these companies win awards, or achieve industry milestones. The extra effort you put in will cement your relationship, and pay off in continued business.

4. Communicate clearly. Few things are more frustrating for customers than not being able to find information about your products or services. Make sure that all your communications methods, from web sites to product brochures, from training manuals to phone answering systems, focus on meeting your customers' needs. Customers will notice, and they will appreciate the difference!

5. Keep in touch. As Woody Allen said, "Eighty percent of success is showing up." Make a plan to consistently "show up" in front of your clients. A quick phone call or a note in the mail shows your customers that you're thinking about them. Send an online newsletter to keep customers informed about your company. However you choose to stay in touch, do it consistently. Keep reminding your customers that you are uniquely qualified to solve their problems. They'll come to you first for solutions!

Creating a customer-focused business requires focus and consistent work. But the rewards are substantial. Focusing on customer satisfaction builds a base of loyal customers that bring in steady revenue, and serve as great word-of-mouth advertisers. What a great way to build a long-lasting, profitable business!