

Love Thy Customer

Providing first-class customer service is the most important thing your business can do. Customers demand more from less and they don't even tell you. It's never been more important to learn this if you want to achieve targets, fend off competitors and nurture a more successful business.

If you're looking for the ultimate competitive advantage, customer service is by far the most consistently successful and the most difficult for competitors to replicate. And who is your competitor? Everyone! Customers don't compare like with like any more. They compare experience with experience. This could include:

- The company that picks up the phone quicker
- The company that delivers an order faster
- The company that exceeds expectations more regularly
- The company that understands customer needs more clearly

How does your service compare to the experiences your customers have when they shop with Amazon? Or Waitrose? Or Timpsons? Or any of the other businesses who've made customer service their focus?

Outstanding service makes customers feel more special and loved, and also more forgiving. Conversely, unhappy and stressed customers buy a lot less. So increasing the level of your customer service will ensure your customers feel more inclined to spend money whilst making them more likely to overlook any problems. And really incredible service usually costs little or nothing. What a perfect combination!

•Focus on the benefits and understand the value you provide to your customers. The only way to do this completely is to ask "what are their needs and how do we solve them?" Even if you think you know, ask a handful of your customers. You can never know too much about why people buy from you. They don't care how long you've been in business or how many staff you employ. They care what you can do for them. Benefits build rapport by demonstrating that you understand their point of view. If customers are saying "it's too expensive", they haven't understood the value of your offering.

•Understand customer lifetime value, i.e. the total value of a customer to your business. When you understand how much a customer is worth to you, you can fully understand the cost of acquisition and conversion, and decide how much cash and time you want to dedicate to them.

•Provide explicit guarantees, which remove obstacles to sale. It's vital that your customers view you more distinctively or advantageously than your competition. And to do this, you can make it your responsibility to allow customers to preview and experience your offering, entirely at your risk. Every business really guarantees the sales transaction, through standard practise or legal obligation. But they brush it under the carpet rather than highlight the benefits of this for the customer. By making the guarantee a powerful condition of sale, you can state specifically how the customer will come out protected and ahead of the game. Imagine from your customers' perspective the choice of suppliers available to them. Four other businesses might not mention their guarantees, or might state it is a basic legal requirement. But you not only mention it, you insist that it be a condition of doing business! Which supplier would you choose? It might seem too daunting to provide guarantees for every element of your offering, but everything that performs at the level you promise can be guaranteed in some way.

•Keep communicating by educating, informing, and entertaining. Position yourself as an expert to gain your customers' trust and confidence, through your PR, direct communications and your website. Provide information, reviews, reports, or details on your specialist area. Customers often don't know the right questions to ask, so help them out by anticipating their concerns and providing straight answers.

•Not getting complaints doesn't mean that you're providing the best service. Adore the customer who gives you honest feedback. They may well be speaking for half a dozen customers who feel the same way but will go elsewhere rather than tell you.

And remember, your internal customer is just as important as your external customer. Happy staff provide superior customer service, so treat your staff the way you want them to treat your customers.

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