

Ask SCORE

By Willy Campbell

Build Repeat Business Through Customer Satisfaction

Attracting customers is important to your business, we all agree on that. But even more important is keeping the customer you have as a repeat. Since only a fraction of first purchase customers will return, it is extremely important that you emphasize the mission to generate repeat business. Let the high satisfaction rate of your current customers do its part to lead you to the best referrals to future customers.

Put yourself in your customer's shoes. Understand your customer's most important needs and priorities. If you are not sure why they are coming to you...ask. You cannot build on your business strengths if you don't know what they are; and they are truly those that are perceived by your customers and not necessarily the same as imagined by you. What counts? Convenience or location or hours? Ease of access to you or your employees? Friendly service? Knowledgeable staff? Price? A better product?

Employee training can pay dividends. If your employees interact with customers, whether over the counter or over the phone, they need to know the fundamentals of customer service, not just the product information.

Be sure your customers know that you appreciate them. Sending them a thank-you note after a large order is bound to make a favorable impression, and it's not just about letting them know you appreciate your business. You are reinforcing the customer's opinion that doing business with you was a wise decision.

Follow-up after the sale. Ask customers for their feedback on your product or service. Did they have a good experience with your company? If so, can they tell you how or why? If not, what would have made it better – and, can you do anything to fix it now? Use customer comment cards and surveys regularly. You may be surprised at the things you haven't noticed – but your customers have.

Customer complaints are a golden opportunity. If handled with patience, diplomacy and an honest willingness to meet the customer half way, you will be able to turn a disgruntled customer into a loyal patron who recommends your business to others. Some thoughts on handling customer complaints:

- Listen to each complaint and consider it seriously. No matter how foolish the complaint may seem, most people will complain only if they feel they have a legitimate grievance.
- Try to take the customer's point of view. If you were in his or her place, would you be upset or angry about the problem?
- If at all possible, troubleshoot the complaint while the customer is present.
- If your investigation shows that the customer is right, admit it immediately. Apologize and offer to make amends on the spot. An open and honest response brings you from conflict to common ground.

- Should the complaint turn out to be baseless, try to let the customer save face. Tell him or her that the feedback has helped you evaluate and improve your service.

To learn more about building your customer base with great customer service, contact the Sandhills Chapter of SCORE “Counselors to America’s Small Business”. SCORE is a nationwide nonprofit association of expert business counselors who provide free and confidential business counseling to small business owners. The Sandhills Chapter is very active in counseling, mentoring and presenting free business seminars. It is currently expanding these activities and is seeking motivated volunteers. You can reach the Chapter via the web at www.sandhillsscore.org or at 910-692-3926.

Remember – send your business questions to me at www.contact@sandhillsscore.org and don’t forget to provide a way to contact you. I may not be able to answer all of them in this column but every one will receive a personal answer from one of our Sandhills SCORE counselors!