

When It Comes to Customer Service, Small is Beautiful

In today's extremely competitive world one thing that customers value highly is what we like to call Customer Service. More often than not this can make the difference in which of competing companies gets the sale. We feel more comfortable buying from the business that gives us the best service. And this is where a small business can have a "leg up" on its larger competitors. It can realize a powerful competitive advantage in an age when more consumers crave and expect a high level of service and timely responsiveness.

A small business, especially one where the owner is active in the operation of the enterprise, is in a position to be more knowledgeable of customer needs, more nimble in making business decisions, and more responsive to changes in customer needs and attitudes. These businesses have direct access to their customers' requirements, attitudes, and opinions and they know the kinds of products or services they want, when they want them, and how best to deliver them.

To gain these valuable insights, it is necessary to proactively assess what it does and should be doing to keep customers coming back, rather than opening the door for the customer to be tempted to try the bigger competitor down the street. And that starts with looking at the business from the customer's point of view.

A savvy owner will ask questions like: "How would I like to be treated if I were a first-time customer or a "regular?" Also "How can I make it easier for my customers to find the items they need?" and "How can I get to know my customers better?" This requires making sure all employees are well trained in the products and services offered, learn to recognize customer names and faces, and take an interest in the success of the business.

They also visit other stores and service centers, including some that may be unrelated to the business, to see what they do that is appealing, and adapt those practices to enhance the customer experience. Similarly, they watch for aspects they don't like, so they can help prevent similar problems from arising in their business.

How these small businesses connect with customers by phone or email also helps differentiate them from the sometimes-bureaucratic nature of their larger competitors. They answer calls promptly and with a friendly greeting. They avoid putting callers on hold for longer than a minute; taking a message, if necessary, and responding as soon as possible. They make sure their email messages, especially responses to inquiries, are upbeat and friendly.

A well-run small business is a delight for both customers and owners. Over time the business will grow to a larger size. But if it stays nimble and responsive to the customers it can keep the edge that made it successful.

Of course, a good tactic for gaining a competitive edge for your business is to contact SCORE "Counselors to America's Small Business."

SCORE is a nationwide nonprofit association of experienced business people 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. If you wish to speak to SCORE counselors about your business, please register as a client by entering your information at www.edmisscore.org/0364 and one of our counselors will contact you.

In addition to counseling by appointment, the Sandhills chapter of SCORE has members available for drop-in service for those who have registered on www.edmisscore.org/0364, from 10am to noon Tuesdays and Fridays at the Moore County Chamber of Commerce building on Hwy 15/501 in Southern Pines. The phone number there is 910-692-3936.

The local SCORE Chapter is always seeking motivated volunteers. More information on SCORE's counseling activity and a complete description of each seminar can be found at the Sandhills SCORE website, www.sandhillsscore.org.