

Service with a smile



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We've all been on the receiving end of bad service at one time or another. Just the other day I telephoned a business to enquire about the availability of a particular item. The woman who answered the phone sighed audibly as I began my request, and then yawned half way through my enquiry before interrupting me to snap: "I don't have time for this right now. We're very busy. You'll have to call back." Needless to say, I didn't. In fact, I was happy to pay more somewhere else simply because I got a smile when I walked through the door.

According to Susan Ward, a leading Canadian consultant in small business development, the key to good service is not only keeping your customers, but sending them away happy – happy enough to pass positive feedback about your business along to others, who may then try your product or service themselves, and in turn become repeat customers.

Susan says: "If you're a good salesperson, you can sell anything to anyone once. But it's your approach to customer service that determines whether you'll be able to sell that person anything else. The important thing to remember in forming a relationship with your customers is this: you'll be judged by what you do, not what you say."

The following is a brief and simple compilation of suggestions from customer service experts around the world, and the best part is that although in most cases it doesn't cost you anything extra to deliver good service, doing so will have a notable impact on your bottom line.

Answer your phone

If a customer calls your business, they want to speak to a person, not a machine. Consider call forwarding or an answering service. Hire staff if you need to, but make sure that customer calls are answered, and if for whatever reason you miss a call, make sure it's returned promptly.

Respond to enquiries promptly

Respond to enquiries as soon as possible – whether it's immediately, within the hour, the same day or a week, be prompt and timely. If you're not able to offer a complete response immediately – ie the customer has requested a range of information that will take some time to compile – acknowledge their enquiry and let them know when to expect an answer. If you receive most of your enquiries via e-mail, set up an automatic response feature to let customers know you've received their information and when to expect an answer. Include the telephone number of someone to contact if they require immediate assistance.

Don't make promises you can't keep

If you tell a customer their new patio table will arrive in three weeks, make sure it does. If you can't guarantee that it will, don't say it. Avoid building expectation you can't meet. The same rule applies to appointments and deadlines. If you arrange to meet a customer on site at 11.30am, but turn up an hour later, it doesn't matter if your reasons are legitimate, the customer feels you don't care or worse, that they've been lied to. Think before you make a promise, because nothing annoys customers more than a broken

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one. And if you find yourself in a situation where you made a promise you thought you could keep, but are no longer able to, inform the customer without delay and take immediate action to resolve the situation.

Deal with complaints

Complaints are rarely pleasant to deal with, but they can help identify specific areas of your business in need of improvement, especially in relation to customer service. Try to view each complaint as a chance to learn and gain a competitive edge. Avoid taking the easy way out by saying, "You can't please everyone all the time." Maybe not, but you may be able to please this one person this one time and perhaps even turn them into a vocal advocate for your business.

Be helpful – even if there's no immediate profit in it

A friend of mine runs a lunch bar at the main entrance to a country town in our state's south. She is regularly asked for directions to an out of the way bed and breakfast retreat by lost tourists, whom she is always happy to assist. Even if they don't buy anything, most of them return some time during their visit for groceries or lunch, and many comment that it was her cheerful assistance that brought them back. The key here is to view every new contact as your next big customer. While the initial enquiry may be small, or even unrelated, it's still a chance to make a big impression. And if down the track they do require a service you provide, chances are they'll think of you.

Empower your staff

There's nothing more annoying than being told, "Sorry, I can't help you with that. I'll need to check with my manager," or even worse, "Jill handles those enquiries. She's on leave for two weeks. Perhaps you could call back then." Try to give every member of your staff enough information and power to answer general enquiries and to make those small customer-pleasing decisions without having to say, "I don't know, but so-and-so will be back at..."

Throw in something extra

We all like to get more than we expected. Whether it's complimentary gift-wrapping, a free recipe card with the purchase of your weekly groceries, a discount off a future purchase or free

delivery, customers will always appreciate something extra.

Be polite

This is an easy one, but something a lot of people downplay. It's important to smile and to be friendly. Treat your customers with courtesy and always be polite. Listen attentively when they speak and try to understand where they're coming from. Be helpful and friendly and remember the golden rule: treat them the way you like to be treated when you're the customer. And make sure your staff do the same.

Good customer service isn't rocket science, but it does take commitment. It's well worth the investment and likely to bring in more new customers than promotions and price slashing ever did!

