

Strengthening Your Competitive Edge

Part 2: Providing Quality Service

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Last month we looked at how to increase your likelihood of being selected by prospective customers or of being able to retain current customers. Now let's turn to the actual service experience – what do you need to be doing to ensure that customers have an excellent experience with your company? Keep in mind that you want to under-promise and over-deliver.

Strengthening Frontline Service

If you haven't done this in a while, try contacting your company as if you were a new customer. What is it like? If you phoned, how quickly was the phone answered – within three rings? If you left a phone message, how rapidly was the call returned – within 15 minutes? If you emailed, did you receive a response within an hour? Then think about quality – did the person who responded sound interested in you and knowledgeable?

Often we forget that the person who answers the phone or handles initial transactions is really our frontline marketer. We typically call such positions the receptionist or cashier or customer service representative, and consider them administrative support rather than marketers. Even though they play a critical role in customer attraction and retention, they are often the lowest paid employees.

Think about your own experience as a customer. How do you feel when it takes you multiple calls to make contact, or when a problem is not resolved immediately but instead is referred through multiple administrative levels? Probably frustrated and angry. If you value your customers, wouldn't you want to have them interacting with your best trained, most knowledgeable employees? Your own company will benefit if your frontline staff have the authority to address common issues on the spot.

Providing Predictable Service

For customers, buying a service is risky because they really have no idea what quality of service they will receive. So they are particularly sensitive to having predictable pricing and timelines. If a service has a standard price, customers will expect to be charged that price. If they hear that someone else has gotten a better deal, they will be unhappy that they weren't offered that same deal. So, if you provide special pricing for certain customers, the reason for the discounting needs to be clear and consistently applied. If you provide quotes and discover that you have quoted too low, then you need to have a conversation with the customer rather than simply invoicing the higher amount. You may well find that you need to stick with the quoted price to ensure a satisfied customer.

Despite our best intentions, unexpected delays do occur. As long as you notify customers about potential delays and provide options, you can still have satisfied

customers. Customers want to feel that their time is respected and that they have options.

Providing Uninterrupted Service

We need to remember that a service is delivered in the context of a relationship (even if it is temporary). Customers are sensitive to whether or not you value them and their time. Once a service transaction is begun, you need to be careful to complete it without interruption. If a colleague begins talking to you, for example, you need to ask them to wait. Or, if you have to be called away, you need to apologize for the interruption. Otherwise, the customer will feel that they don't matter to you ... and will return the feeling by taking their business elsewhere.

Providing Complete Service

It is easy to assume that, once we have completed our part of the service delivery, it's done. But actually it is not completed until the customer says that they are satisfied. In fact, in some instances customers will refuse to pay for the service unless and until they have the right of review or inspection.

The same is true with "internal" customers or other staff. If one staff member is asked to carry out a task, that task is not complete until there has been a report back and agreement that everything is fine.

Respect your customers, and they will help you grow your business!