

Control what you can control

As a business owner, you may not be able to control the stock market or unemployment rates or the cost of gas. However, if you want to stay in business and retain the customers that you have, and also get new ones, you need to pay attention to how you and your employees are treating your customers.

With spending down and shoppers scarce, now is the worst time to let customer service slide. While you may not be able to grow your business, you can at least maintain it by keeping the customer base you have now. If a customer has a problem with your business, or more specifically has a problem with an employee, the customer can stop doing business with you and go straight to your competitor.

For many companies, keeping customers happy and loyal has turned into an art form. For starters, it's all about listening to the customer's needs; sometimes it means throwing in a few extras here and there. And it could even mean honoring a discount coupon even if it has expired. Sometimes in order to fulfill your customer's need for products and services, as well as their budget, you have to be creative. You might feel as if you are playing "Let's Make a Deal" with your customers. However, we have to be flexible in our offerings and our terms and make it attractive and affordable for customers to do business with us, or they won't! While giving a straight discount off of the bottom line isn't always the best thing to do, tossing in some extras can often sweeten the deal. Sometimes you have to offer a lower-cost item or give them a few extras they wouldn't have gotten otherwise. Show your customer that you are willing to go the extra mile and that you truly want their business.

If customer service isn't at the forefront of your organization, it should be. If it isn't, your competitors will be happy to take your customers and their business from you! Bend over backward to do whatever you can to help your customers. Even companies with a history of good customer service can benefit from refresher customer service training courses, especially for front-line employees.

Not every customer is a repeat customer. The experience they have with your company could be a lasting one. If your customer received a gift that isn't quite what they liked or needed, you want your employees to work with them to get their issues resolved rather than have an employee say "Well that's our return policy".

Although it can be an effort to constantly work to please your customers and make them happy, the small sacrifice you are making now will pay off in the long run. When we provide outstanding service to our customers, they will reward us with their

business. Remind your employees that without your customers, you have no business. If a business wants to stand apart from their competition, customer service is an important area where they can do that.

What you can do

A dissatisfied customer is not a lost cause. According to a recent Harvard study, an unhappy customer can be turned into a repeat customer 80 percent of the time if the business takes action and provides outstanding customer service. Here is some advice to keep your customers coming back:

Customer service starts with a vision. It's not just words on a wall. It takes all employees to be focused on providing an outstanding experience for their customers for it to happen. It has to be a consistent effort on the part of every employee that interfaces with our customers.

Training, training and more training. A well-trained, knowledgeable and courteous staff is the first line of defense against losing a customer. Businesses should establish regular training sessions where employees are updated on all products and services that the business provides. Employees should also be skilled in communication skills, rapport building and how to handle irate customers.

Give your staff the authority to resolve disputes. Customers want to feel and know that the person they are speaking with that is representing the company has the authority to help them. Employees should be able to resolve common problems without having to talk to a supervisor. This practice will eliminate unnecessary customer irritation.

Don't forget to follow up. Customers who voice concerns and problems need to know that the company cares about them even after the issue has been resolved. A good way for businesses to show customers that their satisfaction is a high priority is through communicating with them, before, during and after the problem.

Learn from common complaints. A complaint is a gift. Treat it that way and you can learn from it. Receiving a complaint is one of the best ways to find areas for improvement within a business. Management should continually monitor complaints for trends and recurring problems. Working to resolve the underlying issues leading to common complaints can have a major effect on the experience of many future customers.

Control the way you deal with customers and your chances of them remaining your customers will improve.