

Deliver Extreme Customer Service

By Suzanne Martin

When it comes to customer service, the old standards have grown stale. Today's savvy consumers want personalized attention and immediate action. They crave extras that make them feel valued. Clients and customers want service that sizzles.

In today's hyper competitive market, the ability to identify and satisfy customer needs isn't the key to success - it's the key to survival.

The success of your micro-business rides on the wings of your customer service. Deliver more service than your customers expect, and your business will soar. Deliver less, and profits will plummet.

"In today's hyper-competitive market, the ability to identify and satisfy customer needs isn't the key to success-it's the key to survival," says Chris Bogan, CEO of Best Practices, LLC.

Every micro-business owner can recite the traditional service standards: greet customers, honor your guarantees, respond promptly to complaints. But customers now expect more, especially from small businesses.

When people do business with big companies, they expect low prices and big selections. Think of Wal-Mart. Think of the array of services offered by Home Depot.

But when those same customers come to your door, they want warm, personal service. They're willing to trade lower prices for the feeling of being recognized and appreciated. They're willing to forfeit a huge selection of products and services to do business with someone who knows their name and understands their needs.

That's what customers expect from your micro-business-personal customer service.

"Customers have high expectations," says Bogan. "If you fail to fully understand and meet them, they'll become someone else's customers with the click of a mouse."

So how can you take service to a higher level? Here are seven secrets every micro-business owner can use to improve customer service:

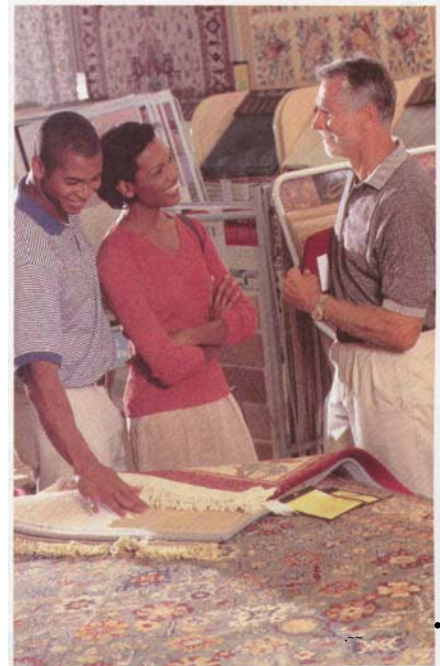
1. Get to know your customers. Know their names, their preferences, their buying habits, their hot buttons. Pay attention to your customers and you'll be able to deliver the service they want.

2. Give rewards. Rewards enhance the customer's experience with your business. They're a way to say thanks. They're a way to express your appreciation. Loyalty cards will work wonders for almost any small retail business. You can also use inexpensive, fun rewards to show customers you value their business. Including an unexpected freebie with a purchase COSL~ little, but gives customers a great feeling.

3. Treat your best customers like royalty. Your existing customers deserve more attention than prospects. And your very best existing customers should be treated like royalty. Reward them. Romance them.

4. Deliver a great guarantee. And make good on your promises. Whether you sell services or products, offer the highest standard of guarantee that's possible for your business. Customers will take notice.

5. Empower employees. Train employees on service standards and give them power to make customers happy. Develop specific guidelines for service.



Spell out actions you expect employees to take when greeting customers, accepting refunds and answering questions.

6. Stay in contact. Let your customers know you appreciate their business. Send thank-you notes. A simple, handwritten card that says, "We appreciate your business," generates contact with customers. Mail birthday cards. Send recommendations for new products and services that might benefit them.

7. Make amends for mistakes. Stuff happens, and when it does, make every attempt to solve the problem to the customer's satisfaction. When screw-ups happen, your level of customer service can save the day.

You can find concrete examples of stellar customer service and fresh ideas for your micro-business online. Just go to www.entrepreneurialconnection.com/skills.asp and click on "Extreme Customer Service."