

Customer Relations

BY CHRISTINE HEPBURN

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What kind of gift is your business?

Consider your business the same way you would a gift you are giving someone you care about. What details are included for your customers, how much effort goes into preparation, how is it presented?

It's rare to hear a business not mentioning customer service as a part of their processes. Yet, extensive research I conducted across Australia and New Zealand identified just 17 per cent have defined their customer experience.

Only 70 per cent of those offer staff training in that customer experience. The rest are leaving the end result to individual interpretation and chance.

How often do you walk away from any business feeling 'wow that was amazing'? On the other hand, how many times do you leave experiencing annoyance or frustration? Or do you simply feel satisfied, not consciously thinking of that business again.

Word of mouth is the most inexpensive and powerful form of marketing. Use it to your advantage. People don't talk about satisfaction, just poor or exceptional, with the ability to share experiences when emotions are high through instant communication such as Twitter, Facebook and smart phones.

Although competition is strong with many margins reduced, research shows consumers will pay for quality service even in difficult economic periods. We have an innate need to be respected, valued and appreciated.

It's also clear that in the absence of an exceptional experience, consumers will choose price.

From the customer's perspective, the following points have been identified as

being the main reasons for businesses not providing an exceptional experience:

- staff attitude
- lack of training (knowledge and service)
- lack of interest in the customer
- lack of consistency

Regardless of what we think, it's what the customer thinks that becomes reality. Good or satisfied isn't enough.

Every interaction with a business is an experience. What that experience is, makes the difference to how hard the business has to work attracting or retaining customers. We can't expect consumers to support local businesses without being prepared to invest in creating a service culture by continually striving to do better.

Mahatma Gandhi said: "A customer is the most important visitor on our premises, he is not dependent on us. We are dependent on him. He is not an interruption in our work. He is the purpose of it. He is not an outsider in our business. He is part of it. We are not doing him a favour by serving him. He is doing us a favour by giving us an opportunity to do so."

Customer service is not a department or counter, it's an attitude. Be clear on core values, mission, vision, customer retention and service experience, which make up your business culture. They are valuable to your bottom line.

More than ever, it's time to focus on the importance of providing memorable experiences in every business, regardless of size or type.

There are several factors affecting many service standards.

One is an aura of complacency. Another is staff lacking an awareness of what is required to deliver exceptional service, with yet another being an approach where inconsistency in service delivery creates its own problem. A number of excellent experiences can be undone in a moment with one poor one, resulting in the loss of even loyal customers.

Service is the key element completely within our control. How we treat our customers and the overall experience they receive will ultimately dictate our success or failure.


Not only is service within our control, research shows that it's the one thing that can, and will, set us apart – for better or worse.

- **Just 5 per cent improvement in customer retention brings a 25 per cent to 85 per cent increase in profitability;**
- **Cost of retention of a client/customer is 10 per cent of the cost of acquiring a new one;**
- **68 per cent of customer defection is because of perceived indifference.**

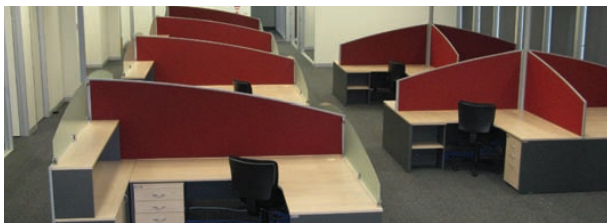
Your competitive advantage cannot be your price, as someone can always undercut you. The real competitive edge is how your customers are treated, with every call, email, visit, or view of a website – it is a unique opportunity to differentiate yourself.

Don't settle for the results you're getting, even if they're great. Seek greater results and be exceptional.

Develop loyal clients who will market your business for you by focusing on 'being of service' rather than 'just delivering a service or product'.

Winter workshop your staff skills to enjoy the rewards of offering an enhanced 'gift'. 

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