

Building Better Customer Relationships – Take 1

In business as in life, people tend to associate with and buy from people they like and trust. If you ask any successful salesperson, no matter what business sphere they're in, what the single most important element of their success is – without a doubt the answer will be, the ability to build and develop relationships.

This having been said, certainly it is reasonable that businesses base decisions on what's best for their customers, employees, B.O.D etc. One cannot expect a good relationship to replace a genuine need or value proposition. Still, while the relationship cannot replace a need, it doubtlessly is a facilitator. Developing that rapport is apt to induce a potential prospect to listen, share needs and take action. Many times trust (an inherent part of any relationship) can be more of a motivation to do business that cost/price.

By way of defining trust, in a business relationship it is the perception by one party that the other party in question will honor his/her word and can be relied upon to behave honorably and ethically. In some ways it may be the perception that the other person will “do the right thing” and not simply engage in self-serving activities. At times, this perception is based on actual track record but many times is based solely on belief. The belief is born of the manner in which we conduct ourselves while developing the relationship.

While partners and business associates expect one set of actions that demonstrate trustworthiness, customers may expect a different set. While the two share the notion of ethical behavior and doing the right thing, the definition of the right thing may differ. Customers base their perceptions of others on their own biases and don't necessarily have a system to understand subjective reasoning. Nonetheless, there are ways companies can build and earn their trust. The effort is not necessarily an exercise in earning trust for the sake of trust, but it is a critical enabler to allow your prospect to take a chance on your company or product.

The purpose of trust, from a business perspective is to reduce perceived risk, offset any apprehensions, and result in a buy action. Customers usually don't ask themselves if they really trust a company or its product, but their perception of the company/product will be based on a set of concerns for which that they constantly seek answers. Following are some customer concerns a company must address;

1. Respect – Does the company respect the customer enough to deliver?

A customer can't trust someone he/she doesn't respect. We earn respect by showing respect. Respect is a fundamental of trust. To demonstrate respect a company must show respect for customer ideas by providing them the opportunity to give feedback and listening to what the customer is saying. By engaging in a dialogue and genuinely caring what the customer is saying a company can show respect.

Respect also means accepting the customer's position. This does not mean you need to alter policy every time a customer shares an idea, but it does mean you need to accept the validity of the idea and then communicate why the company cannot (at this time) act upon it. When you are discussing business with a prospect – display your respect for their position even if it shows a lack of understanding of your capacity, needs or business parameters. Validating at least their right to their opinion is a significant sign of respect.

Another, lesser adhered to demonstration of respect is showing respect for someone's time. Showing up for meetings on time shows that you value the other person and respect that their time is valuable. Conversely, showing up late communicates the idea that you assume the individual has nothing better to do than wait around for you, while you are so busy you couldn't make it to the meeting on time. Your commitment to demonstrating success needs to include being on time (and ending on time).

2. Competence – Display your ability to deliver on your promises

Your prospects will base their perception of your ability to deliver on large commitments based on how you perform on the little ones. Forgetting to send additional product info, specs etc. on time are ways of displaying incompetence. Responding with a follow-up e-mail on the meeting with an updated proposal as promised though seemingly trivial is a show of competence and your commitment to deliver what you promise when you promise.

Your target customers can only base their perceptions of you on the information they have and what they experience – the information you provide and the behavior you demonstrate. If you want to be perceived as being highly competent you need to display highly competent attributes.

3. Value – What do you deliver that the competition does not?

The more effective you can be at conveying the added value your company delivers, and how this contributes value to your prospect, the more your customer will want to trust you and the company you represent.

By asking your customer about his/her goals, challenges and needs, you are displaying an interest in delivering value. If you only discuss your product or service attributes – you are communicating that your only interest is to make the sale (your goals and needs).

Asking questions and listening to the answers portrays your commitment to added value based on your wish to understand and meet your prospect's needs. This builds trust.

4. Trust - What's in it for you?

Your claims that the customer needs your product now could serve to undermine your efforts to communicate your goal of developing a long-term relationship. You need to offset any suspicion by acknowledging that you are pursuing a profit based proposition, and that the win-win of the circumstances is what will enable you to be more attentive in meeting the customer's needs. Denying any self-interest is immediate cause for suspicion, while being overtly aggressive in admitting the profit motive may come off as self-centered. You need to find the balance that communicates win-win.

Succeeding in business and sales is directly correlated to ones ability to succeed in building, developing and maintaining relationships. This month we presented four basic building blocks to be considered when entering new business relationships. In essence, they all are presented while we communicate with our prospects. Next month we will delve into the art of communication through conversation and how it serves to build better customer relationships.

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