

## Retaining the Customer - Helpful Hints

Selling is not only the act of gaining new customers. A successful company must retain and grow the customers they already have. Here are some helpful hints.

1. Start your customer relationship efforts with those of your customers who are so dissatisfied that they have either abandoned you or are considering doing so. These customers offer the clearest indication of where you need improvement and how you can improve. They also offer the opportunity to win them back by showing you care.

2. Ask your customers on a regular basis how they feel about your product or service. Not only will they appreciate your concern and interest, but also you will be pre-empting any negative feedback they may have. Keep in mind that about 95% of unhappy customers do not complain to someone who can remedy the problem. Yet many unhappy customers share their displeasure with up to 20 people. Scheduling satisfaction inquiries gives you a chance to make good on a problem before damage is done to your account, and your reputation.

3. The key to making an unhappy customer happy begins with expressing an understanding of how that person feels. Showing empathy - the identification with the thoughts or feelings of another - is critical. Apologizing without showing you understand is useless. Fixing the problem without understanding is also less effective. First acknowledge and understand how the other person feels. Then your apology will seem sincere. And your remedy will seem genuine.

4. Empower your customer sales personnel to make decisions. Give them guidelines to follow, but let them complete the interaction with the customer to that customer's satisfaction. Significantly more often than not your employee will make the right decisions and leave your customers happy. Nothing bothers a customer more than being told by a customer relations representative that he or she can't be of assistance or needs to speak with his or her supervisor. Give them the ability to resolve issues as they arise. That's what you hired them for.

5. It's always easier to retain a customer than it is to gain a new one, and it's much easier to retain a customer than it is to regain one that has left. This means you must make every effort to detect dissatisfaction among customers before they make the decision to move to one of your competitors. Your company should make use of CRM technology, but if you are too small to institute enterprise-wide software, implement a system that will alert when accounts show unusual changes. Determine the pattern of your customers and proactively respond to their issues.

6. Customers will leave you if they get a sense that you are indifferent. You need to create schedules of contact, sending regular notices, telephone calls and emails. These should not be sales calls, but rather unobtrusive exchanges just letting the client know you care.

7. Approach customer concerns with an eye toward resolution. Work hard to solve customer challenges with your product. Open your dialogue by seeing what you can do to help, and use that as a springboard to see where else you can be of service.

8. Call your own company from time to time and go through the customer relations process. Are you satisfied with the time it takes, the replies you are getting and the remedy offered? If you're not, certainly your customers aren't either.

9. Retaining customers means growing with them, continuing to meet their needs. You need to keep your pulse on your industry and your customer needs and make sure that you continue to offer the best solution and best value available.