

Beyond Satisfaction

Five keys to creating true customer loyalty

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Think your customers are satisfied? They very well may be. Unfortunately, customer satisfaction doesn't always lead to customer loyalty. These days, even if your customers are completely satisfied with your product or service, 40% of them will leave you and start doing business with your competition.

On the surface, 40% may not seem like that much. After all, over half of your satisfied customers are coming back. But in dollars and cents, 40% is costing you more than you may think, because attracting new customers can cost nearly double the amount it takes to attract repeat business from your existing customer base.

What's the solution? Quite simply, in order to retain all your customers and increase your sales, you need to go beyond customer satisfaction and develop the rapport that will make your customers adore you. Only then will you achieve true customer loyalty.

Contrary to popular belief, increased technology isn't the way to create customer loyalty. The more high-tech the business world becomes, the more challenging it is to build customer rapport. And despite their conveniences, email, voicemail, fax machines, palm tops and the many other technological marvels of today take our attention away from our customers and eliminate the human touch needed to build long-term customer relationships.

The good news is that developing exceptional customer rapport is easier than you may think. Here are five rapport-building tips to help you go beyond customer satisfaction.

1. Establish a Common Ground

Customers relate to those people most like themselves. They want to feel a connection with you beyond that of being just a client. Therefore, you need to establish a common ground with each customer quickly.

If your business is such that customers come to your office, make your office decor an extension of your personality and your likes. Place family photos, trophies, awards, certificates, diplomas/degrees, travel pictures and anything else of personal importance prominently in your office. Your customers will be able to browse at your various items, and they will usually find at least one piece that somehow relates to their own life.

For example, suppose you have a photo of your son in his school baseball uniform. If your customer has a son or daughter on a school team as well, you've just established a common bond. Or perhaps you went to school in Michigan or attended a one-day sales seminar in Texas. If your customer has any relation to those locations or events, he or she will feel an immediate connection with you and will be more receptive to what you have to offer.

If your office doesn't accommodate customer visits, you need to develop telephone rapport with every customer who calls you. While this is definitely more challenging than building face-to-face rapport, it is certainly possible. To start, find out where your caller is from and comment on that location's weather or some other positive event taking place there. Most newspapers and Internet news sites report on national weather and national events, so it'll be easy to find the information you need.

Also, listen for clues from the other person. Do you hear a dog in the background, a child, or any other indicators of the person's lifestyle? If so, comment on them. Do whatever possible to find something you have in common with the other person.

2. Listen and Show Concern

Your customers always want to talk about their most favorite topic: themselves and their situation, wants or needs. The more you talk about yourself or your business, the more you turn your customers away. In general, people don't take an active interest in a stranger's life. Therefore, you need to stand out by building a relationship through talking about the other person and offering compliments when appropriate.

Listening involves so much more than simply not talking. It's a matter of understanding your client, giving him or her your full attention, and making your customer feel important. To know if your listening skills are up to par, ask yourself these questions: "Does my mind wander when I'm listening? If so how do I bring it back?" "Do I make silent judgments about the other person?" "Am I thinking of what I am going to say next or am I truly listening?" "Is the other person talking more than I am?" Your honest answers will help determine where your listening skills can be improved.

Once you listen attentively, you need to let your customer know that you care about his or her situation. Do this by asking open-ended questions (those that prompt more than a yes or no response) and by interjecting with "come-on" statements, such as "I see," "I understand," "Oh really," etc. When listening, always remember the old saying: "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Live by those words to create customer loyalty.

3. Use Humor

One of the quickest ways to build rapport is through humor. A good joke or funny story eases tension and breaks down mental barriers. It also shows customers your softer, more human side.

When you get people to laugh with you, you've formed an instant bond. The fact that you were both able to let down your guard and laugh brings you closer together and lays the groundwork for a future relationship. That bond tells customers, "We're in this together."

If you don't think you're a natural comic, you can still use humor to strengthen your customer relationships. Write down good jokes or funny stories as you hear them.

You don't need to have a guffaw, but adding humor within your comfort zone establishes a connection. Don't be afraid to let your funny side show.

4. Keep a Positive Attitude

When you're positive and upbeat, people naturally want to be around you and do business with you. Unfortunately, in today's world, seeds of negativity are all around us, from traffic jams to 50+ hour work weeks. How we choose to look at those situations, however, determines not only our own mood, but also our customer's mood.

When you look at any situation in a positive light, everything around you becomes positive as well. Your mindset also shifts from negative to positive, which in turn "tricks" your body into feeling more alert, more alive, and more stress-free. Even more important, your positive attitude rubs off on others, creating a more harmonious environment for your customers.

This doesn't mean you can never have a bad or stressful day. It simply means you can't show your customers the kind of day you're having. Rather than complain about all your daily woes, keep a lift in your voice, offer a kind word and act as if everything is great. Before you know it, your body responds in a positive manner, and everything does turn out great.

5. Treat Customers Like Family

Your customers want to know that you have their best interests at heart. They want to sense a "we're in this together" attitude. You can easily accomplish this by being genuinely happy and excited to talk with them.

When speaking with your customers, add emotion to your voice and give them your undivided attention. A good idea is to keep notes on customers who routinely visit you. Record things such as birthdays (theirs as well as their spouse's or child's), anniversaries, recent vacations, illnesses and anything else personal that they share. Before meeting with your customer, review your notes and begin your conversation as if you were talking to a dear friend or family member. Ask about the recent trip, the children or even the recent illness. Your customers will be impressed with your concern for them, and you'll quickly surpass their expectations for individualized service.

Since on average only 60% of your satisfied customers do business with you again, you need to continually improve your customer relations skills and build rapport with each and every person who walks through your door. You need to give every satisfied customer a reason to come back, while enticing new prospects to do business with you in the first place.

When you go beyond customer satisfaction and create true customer loyalty, you develop long-term relationships, which leads to increased profits. The end result is customers who love you and a business that grows and thrives.

About the Author

Laura Michaud, MBA, is an author and owner of The Michaud Group, a firm dedicated to bringing personal and business success to their clients. As the former VP of Sales and Marketing for Beltone Electronics, Laura was instrumental in growing sales by over 300% in less than two decades by focusing on sales, marketing, and most of all people. She now helps corporations and associations increase their profits by developing long-term customer relationships.

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