

KEEPING YOUR CUSTOMERS HAPPY

Your customers are vital to your business, and one of the key aspects of being successful is keeping your customers happy. This is an ongoing process, which combines giving them the products/services they want at competitive prices, with providing a high standard of service. Always keep in mind that it is easier to sell to an existing and happy customer than to find new ones.

What does a customer want?

A customer wants to buy the right product/service, at a competitive price, at a time that suits them, and from a convenient location, and they want all this with the minimum of hassle. This package, when successfully put together, can be described as good customer service. What a customer doesn't want is to feel that they have paid too much for something or that they have been sold unsuitable products/services. They also don't want to feel that no one listens to or helps them when things go wrong.

Establish a relationship

To establish a good relationship with your customer you must make sure that you consistently provide a good quality, courteous and professional service, which delivers on time and gives value for money. Tell your customers know how important good customer service is to your business.

An important part of managing long-term relationships with customers is to agree points of contact. These points of contact should cover all levels of relationship with the customer, from the individuals in your business handling day-to-day operations such as ordering and accounts, to those responsible for renegotiating terms or handling complaints. Appropriate individuals at each level should be identified and their roles established. The customer should be notified of any changes to your personnel who are involved with their account.

As a supplier of goods/services the functions you will need to allocate responsibility for include:

- contacting the customer to discuss relevant account issues;
- providing the customer with regular updates about products/services that may be of interest to them;
- providing advice and support for current products/services or any new lines they are interested in purchasing;
- receiving customer feedback about how satisfied or dissatisfied they are with your products/services;
- handling and dealing with any complaints or problems;
- building a personal rapport with the buyer;
- processing orders; and
- dealing with accounts and invoicing.

You should allocate specific responsibilities to named individuals and make sure that they understand exactly what is expected of them. These employees should be encouraged to give you regular and structured feedback about the overall relationship with your customer, as this will allow you to identify any problems and put them right.

To operate a successful customer service policy, your business must embrace the concept as part of its culture. This means that every member of staff must believe that the customer is the most important person to the business and treat them accordingly. The responsibility for getting this message across starts at the top. Senior management must not only communicate the message verbally, but must also demonstrate commitment by leading by example.

It is also important to make sure that you have the resources available to run all of your accounts. Managing your larger customer accounts may be much more demanding than running your smaller ones.

Occasionally, a customer may be very difficult to deal with and, in this situation, you have to take a balanced judgement as to whether the problems caused by this customer are outweighed by the business they give you. Consider whether changing the personnel they deal with regularly might help matters.

Setting up the day-to-day infrastructure

Having a well-managed operational infrastructure will make the process of providing a high level of customer service far easier. One of the main elements is a well-planned and managed set of systems and procedures. Think about using specialist software packages to help you with this.

You should provide clear information to your customers regarding the ordering and processing of goods/services and expected delivery times. You can avoid confusion, confrontation and a possible loss of business by setting realistic expectations.

Your systems and procedures may cover a number of things, such as:

- a database which holds customer and stock information to enable you to process orders efficiently;
- terms of agreement that are discussed with and supplied to all customers;
- defined delivery procedure including costs and timings;
- order processing periods;
- accounts procedures;
- production procedures, for example, minimum stock levels and regular suppliers;
- your returns procedure;
- quality controls; and
- a customer file recording all transaction details and any other relevant information. For larger customers, conduct regular account reviews and record the results on the customer file so that anyone involved in the management of the account can review the information.

Communication

To keep your customers happy, you need to communicate with them effectively. Keep your customers informed about all developments, however small. If prices have to be increased, try to give advance notice so that they can factor the increase into their own cash flows. If you are in the fortunate position of being able to reduce prices, then make sure that you highlight this very prominently.

Communication is a two-way process. Ask your customers for feedback about your products/services and for their opinions on the level of the support they receive. Note their responses and include them in any business planning you undertake. Take on board any problems and put them right.

And finally...

Keeping your customer happy requires ongoing hard work and an understanding and belief that they are the most important person to the business. Don't forget that the customer is king! A happy, satisfied customer will usually buy more and remain loyal. While it can take a long time to build up a good relationship, be aware that one failed transaction or an incidence of poor customer service can undo all the hard work. So it is vital that, when any problems arise, they are dealt with promptly and efficiently.

