



The Customer is King!

Is this a tired phrase, or is it a new relationship strategy that needs to be created amongst your sales and customer service team to get them to focus on common sense communication techniques to use with your clients and customers?

Many people will subscribe to the concept that the customer is the purpose of our business, but won't subscribe to the concept that you need to look after and build a relationship with your client so that they become a customer for life.

When you conduct an analysis of your customer acquisition cost, the results can sometimes be frightening. A simple method of conducting a customer acquisition cost is to have a look at your advertising budget for the last 12 months, take 50% of it (this allows the other 50% to be allocated for retaining existing customer relationships), and then with that 50%, divide it by the number of new customers that you have actually signed up during the last 12 months, and that gives you a very simple customer acquisition cost.

Then the next stage is to have a look at the initial opening order, and the subsequent purchase history, to find out when you broke even and recovered your original acquisition cost from the customer base.

As can be seen, it is easier to keep the existing customers that you have and get them spending more and building their loyalty relationship with you, than what it is to continually try to acquire new clients at a substantial cost to the business.

Customer service staff need to be trained in interactivity techniques to be able to build and maintain customer loyalty as well as relationships.

Some of these techniques include:

- The art of listening – many people think that they listen, however when they add in the perceptive value, you find that they have not been listening to the expectations that were meant to be achieved.

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Listening involves five easy steps.

1. Smile to relax the customer, and make them feel welcome. An easy reason for smiling is that it uses less muscles, only 13, whereas frowning uses 87, and also is using less energy. A smile always makes customers feel welcome, and adds that friendly face to the organisation.
2. Ask an open ended question. Questions that start with can, did, are, may, have, all end up with a yes/no answer, which doesn't lead to a good conversation or communication allowing two-way feedback. However, questions that start with what, when, where, why, which, how, who, are all designed to extract information which you can then listen to, interpret, and react to in a proactive manner.

The ability to ask open ended questions gets you information that you can use to show how good your skills are by converting these to information about your products or services to the client.

3. Stop talking. Having asked an open ended question for some information, don't interrupt while the customer replies, instead make a mental note of any key points that were said from the answer, or write down on a piece of paper or enter onto your computer screen any relevant information.
4. Use non-verbal gestures. Non-verbal gestures don't use sound, but what they do is use various parts of body language to be able to encourage the customer to keep giving you more information. Examples of non-verbal language are:
 - Nodding your head in an affirmative manner to keep the customer talking and giving you information. Also, include nodding your head when you are trying to close a commitment to get the customer to choose the particular service package or product package that you're offering.
 - Keep your hands in front of you and open, so you are not hiding any weapons, and also you are showing the other participant in the listening exercise that you want to receive information by your open hands. The open handed gesture encourages the customer to keep providing information so that you can fill your hands with the information.
 - The eyes – a very important part of communication in customer service is to look at the customer in their eyes, looking at an approximate triangle between the left eye, the right eye, and down the end of the nose. This is sometimes called "the business look". In addition, you can use the eyes to look overall at your customer or your client, however it should not be in an intimate manner that makes the customer become uncomfortable.
5. Pause, and count to 5 seconds. After the customer has given you some information, then pause for 5 seconds, consider the information that they've given you, and then use it to create another question or an answer to a question that the customer has raised.

On the end of every answer that you give to a customer's question, always ask another question to maintain the flow of communication. The person who asks the questions controls the interview.
6. Ask another question. This then completes the listening technique circle.

If all of your customer service and sales team who interact with customers actively practise the listening technique, the ability to reduce errors, build relationships, and ultimately build brand loyalty rapidly increases with this common sense customer service tool.

Giving and making suggestions rather than opinions, is a technique that really builds loyalty amongst customers if sales and customer service teams can focus on suggestions of how to use products and services to the advantage of the customer, rather than saying an opinion, eg. "I think", "You must", which customers don't appreciate.

Suggestions made to customers about how to add some value to their purchase, how to use unique service attributes, and bundling ideas for products or services that go with what they have already purchased, are always well received and are mostly not treated as an attempt to sell but rather as an attempt to help make an informed buying decision by giving some more alternative information.

Customers grow to like and respect sales people and customer service people who make suggestions, and continually make suggestions every time they see them. This is interpreted as a proactive stance and is greatly admired and appreciated, and it will build loyalty and repeat custom.

Promotional tools that will help customer service relationships include such things as daily specials, daily offers, daily products to talk about – whether these are daily, weekly or two-weekly, as long as there is a frequent interchange of products and services to be featured to customers, there then develops a culture of “we are here to help the customers understand our range of products and services that are available so they may purchase more”.

These promotional specials can be displayed on a whiteboard for everybody to see, can come up within the computer database programs, and can even be played over the answerphone while they are waiting to talk to a customer service person.

Product and service knowledge are paramount to building relationships with customers. Nobody likes to talk to somebody who doesn't know, doesn't understand, or can't be bothered to learn, about the products or services that their company offers and promotes to customers. Regular training sessions, regular product knowledge sessions from suppliers, regular questions and answers, regular objection handling, and benefit sessions, all help to build knowledge and challenge your team to demonstrate their confidence in answering customers' questions from their new-found product and service knowledge.

The perception that The Customer is King, is correct. The customer, in their own mind, must perceive they are very important, the customer service and sales people must see that the customer is very important, and positive recognition should be given to those customer service people who practise good customer relationships.

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