

Keeping Your Customers Happy

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Think about the business success stories you've read lately in the media. More and more, customer service seems to be one of the focal points that determines a company's success or failure. Even the news that Marshall Field's is losing its name to Macy's brought out a flurry of comments about the demise of their once legendary customer service. Who knows? Maybe if Field's service was still exemplary, the name would never be changed.

Face it. The type of service your firm offers may be the one factor that differentiates you from the competition. And it certainly can help customer loyalty. Here are nine tips on how to keep your customers coming back.

1. Be real. People like doing business with people they like. And it's hard to like someone who's phony.
2. Be honest. Think of the pushy salespeople who've driven you away with overblown hype or bravado. After a decade of corporate scandals and CEOs marching off to prison, honesty has become more important than ever.
3. Never over promise. Far better to surprise a client by bringing a project in early than to promise a deadline and miss it.
4. If you make a mistake, take responsibility. People make mistakes. It's part of being human, and it's certainly part of being in business. Don't try and cover up or place the blame somewhere else. You'll do far better by saying "I (we) made a mistake. I'm really sorry. We'll take care of it." Then do it.
5. Do what you're being paid to do. Don't be a "yes man or woman". Agreeing with a client just to keep him happy is just plain dumb. If you've been hired for your expertise, that's what the client should get. Otherwise, you'll lose the business eventually anyway.
6. Be a resource. If you're doing the networking you should be doing to build your business, you already have a ready database of resources. Be the vendor or consultant who can help clients solve business (or personal) problems; it makes you a more valuable commodity.
7. Build relationships with your clients. Let them know you're there for them and are truly interested in seeing them prosper. In the end, I think this is one of the key differences between businesses that fail or just slog along...and those that prosper.
8. Return phone calls promptly. Although any savvy businessperson who reads this will wonder why it's included in the list.... since it's so obvious...not all businesspeople are savvy. Or maybe their employees need to have this reiterated from time to time.
9. Let your customers know you appreciate them. And, if you really like them, tell them so. Because as stated in tip #1, we all like doing business with people we like.