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Who Says Valentine's Day Is Just For Lovers?

Or just for school kids to exchange cute little cards and little candy hearts with terms of endearment on them?



By Carolyn West Price

Let's make Valentine's Day a marketing holiday starting this year. That's right—a holiday that addresses the number one problem in marketing—keeping customers (referral sources and employees, too).

You've read it in this column before, but it is worth repeating. Nearly 60% of us stop doing business with a company because we feel unappreciated, not because we are so dissatisfied with their service or product. It's the experience that is flawed, not the actual product or service. Add that to the statistic that most employees feel they are unappreciated (not the same complaint as underpaid), and you have a vicious circle (unhappy employees don't service customers with enthusiasm and care). Fortunately, the unappreciated problem can be addressed for a fraction of what it costs to go find new clients and employees to replace those who go elsewhere. (It boggles the mind why most companies don't address it, however.)

I am not advocating that you use Valentine's Day as a one-shot wonder—

a single opportunity to let people know you care. Instead, let it simply be a reminder or even a kick-off of an enhanced corporate culture that fosters warmth, appreciation, and those famous "warm fuzzies."

To start this process, look at your organization from your customers' eyes; conduct surveys; have someone "audit" your employees about their on-the-job experience (and ways to enhance it for them). Once your research is complete, then design ways to enhance their overall experiences and implement that plan.

In your plan design, be sure to consider everything from the way the phone is answered (live body versus a press-this-or-that system) to your hours to your décor to your return policy, to the user-friendliness of your website. Everything. Even how the restrooms are decorated (or not). At a loss for ideas? Look at what the really successful companies do and then tailor it to fit you. While you may not offer wine and cheese during a hair appointment at a salon, what can you do to make the experience with you a Nordstrom's-like experience? Or an LLBean catalog-order experience?

Also, consider your client/customer communications program. How often do you stay in touch with clients

or customers to provide valuable information and to informally remind them why they do business with you. How often do you just take the time to send a handwritten note to say "Thanks for your business. Here's two lottery tickets, just to thank you for taking a chance on us."

Also, look at your internal marketing. Create an environment that makes your employees love what they do. When they love their jobs, the exuberance and passion passes on to the customers. Your steak dinner may be comparable to the one they could get at the restaurant down the road; or your accounting services could be comparable to the next CPA's. But, the person-to-person experience is a point of differentiation on which too few companies capitalize. This is particularly true in an era when fax, email, and voice mail have been utilized to replace humans in many cases and to de-humanize the relationship. While modern technology may foster efficiencies and ultimately better service for a client, warm-fuzzies make them want to stay.

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