

Get A Customer...and Keep Her!

By Carolyn Touhey

With fourth quarter coming up faster than we expect, now is the time many companies are assessing their marketing efforts—looking at what’s worked during ’10 and what will be different in ’11.

Recognizing that “customer relations” is truly one of the most overlooked areas of marketing—and ironically one of the least expensive—here are some tips to fine tune what you’re doing already (and likely take the pressure off spending money so many ads).

Create a customer appreciation event. Once you have a relationship with customers, say thank you as often as you can. Create a special sale or an invitation to a reception or event you host. This gives you an excuse and opportunity to thank your customers for their business and to create more word-of-mouth marketing.

Send a “gift” to say thank you. Instead of sending a “thank you for business” the gift to the customer’s home, send it to his or her work. The delivery of any such gift creates great water-cooler conversation, starting with the “ooh, who sent you that?” Make sure your package includes a mylar balloon so your impression lingers for a week or two.

Stay in touch & toot your own horn. Assuming you are building and maintaining a database, create at least 6 “touches” during the year. Newsletters are great ways to demonstrate your expertise, tell your customers what you are doing in the community (create the warm fuzzies), and profile new staff or tell your clients other news, awards, etc. Keep it short to increase the likelihood of people reading it. Gone are the days of 11 x 17 newsletters that require 30 minutes to read. Think more often and less information. If you send by email, be sure people can “unsubscribe” easily. And, be sure to use the newsletter to cross-sell what you do so you can avoid having a customer say, “Oh, I didn’t know you do that...”

Sponsor a refer-a-friend contest. Offer a prize to everyone who refers someone or make the carrot more attractive by offering contest with one larger “prize.” Specifically, for every referral, a customer is entered in the monthly drawing, but you’re only on the hook for one prize and a lot of thank you notes.

Commemorate an anniversary. You can either celebrate the company’s anniversary and do something special for clients, or start tracking when a customer starts with you and send something special to acknowledge their anniversary of doing business with you.

Give more to get more. Successful businesses are seen everywhere, and often do pro bono work. What are you doing to donate time and services to non-profit organizations...and making

sure you get recognition for doing so? Remember, if you don't tell your customers what you do in the community, you cannot assume they will know it. Invite key clients to join you on committees, to attend networking events, to go to a seminar, etc. Send a press release when you are appointed to a board of directors or head a committee. Goodwill can't be bought, but it surely can add to the bottomline.

Play matchmaker. If you are in a service business, you are in a prime position to refer one client to another when you see a need that the other can fulfill. You'll strengthen the relationship with the person you referred, and the customer you couldn't help with something will appreciate your assistance in shortening the research process. You can also score major points by nominating a client for an award that will get him or her recognition.

Follow-up after purchases. Design a system that allows you to easily thank customers for their business and to also follow-up. A simple survey can be emailed or mailed to collect information that can help you continue to make improvements, or have someone make a simple phone call to ask how about their service experience. While most calls will go to voice mail, the door is open for someone to give you feedback, and the touch is appreciated regardless. Consider using a mystery shopper periodically to double-check your customer touch program.

Keep your website updated. Not only should you review your website regularly to be sure the site works properly and is current, but you should include testimonials on your website, too. Potential customers like to see what others have to say, and current clients like reinforcement. If you're in the news, make sure reprints or quotes and links go on your website. Remember, not everyone is a media resource so use that to your advantage in establishing and reinforcing your credibility.

Make it easy to work with you. Start with being sure your email signature has a phone number so people can easily call you. This includes your "replies." Consider also your hours of operation, whether you go to your clients or they come to you, and how cumbersome or easy your phone system is for someone wishing to reach a live body. By catering to clients—when and how they want to buy—you may out-shine the competitors and won't have to compete on price quite so much.

Reward loyalty. If appropriate for your business, reward frequent purchasers for their loyalty. You can create a card that gets validated when certain criteria are met, or your program can be more complex with point systems (like frequent flier miles). Such a club says you appreciate their business and are willing to reward them for their repeat business and loyalty.

Do what you promise. The Cardinal Rule in marketing is to deliver what you promise when you promise it for the cost you quoted. If other people are involved (and affect) the delivery of your product or service, make sure they share the same philosophy.

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