Building Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty

A couple of weeks ago, one of my BNI colleagues was sharing with one of my SCORE clients about the importance of maintaining a relationship with current and past customers and suggested some ways to that. This was very helpful to that client and a topic that I referenced in last week’s column. I promised that I would highlight a company that my wife just loves and I will explore some of the key reasons.

Building emotionally satisfied and loyal customers is the holy grail of any small-business owner. But as businesses grow and diversify their offerings, it’s easy for a brand to lose sight of what it originally promised to customers.

Let me tell you a story about a company that has done a lot of things right to accomplish this. My wife loves to entertain and has a lot of great serving sets, some of which she got over 50 years ago (even though she doesn’t look that old). However, as you use these items, sometimes a piece breaks and then what do you do? She does know what to do because she is a loyal, satisfied customer of a company that can find a matching replacement for that piece. In fact, there are times when we travel to visit our son in South Carolina, when we have to make a trip to Greensboro, North Caroline because she just “likes to go there”.

Replacements, Ltd., is a supplier of old and new dinnerware that grew out of founder and CEO Bob Page’s attic. He knows how to keep customers coming back. Over the last 30 years, their customer numbers grew from a handful of cards in a recipe box to a database of more than 10 million loyal customers.

I will just highlight a few of his techniques as summarized by Jacquelyn B. Fletcher, a Minneapolis based writer (as part of the FedEx Small Business Team) and pass them on as tips for you and your company.

1. Know your customers and what makes them tick. Before you can build loyalty, you need to know what attracts customers to your company in the first place. Replacements senior vice president of e-commerce Jack Whitley says their company has found a niche within a niche, so they know their customers well.

They connect buyers to the world’s largest selection of old and new dinnerware. Each year, the company gets thousands of letters from emotional customers. For instance, one husband said his wife was stunned when she opened her Christmas present to find replacement plates for those she’d lost in Hurricane Katrina.

2. Make it easy for your customers. No matter how complicated your operation, ordering should always be easy for customers. Even when choosing from approximately 13 million pieces of inventory in 360,000 different patterns, customers often report that Replacements.com is simple to search. And if they can’t find the pattern they’re looking for, they can call the researchers on staff with the expertise to find it.
3. **Keep customers in the loop.** Show your customers exactly what they can expect when they do business with you. When Bob Page originally started his company, he kept customer orders on three-by-five index cards in a recipe box that he eventually transcribed into a computer database.

Page worked one-on-one with his customers so they always knew where he was in the process of finding their dinnerware. As the company grew, he used technology to help customers feel cared for.

Now orders and shipping information are all seamlessly automated. The moment Replacements fills an order, customers receive FedEx status-tracking information via e-mail so they know their precious package is on its way.

4. **Make the delivery experience your top priority.** Nothing can lose a customer faster than making shipping errors and sending damaged goods. Investing in the best shipping methods can make or break customer loyalty.

Since Replacements often ships fragile china or crystal to replace cherished family heirlooms, it’s critical to customers that packages arrive safely. “It’s really important to get a piece to a customer without breaking it, because we might not find another one,” Whitley says. To gain that assurance, they consulted with FedEx for innovative and extra-safe packing methods, which contribute to Replacements’ shipping error rate of less than one-tenth of a percent.

5. **Collaborate with your vendors to gain an edge.** Your vendors have likely worked with many other businesses to solve the same challenges your business takes on. Tapping into their knowledge is a smart move.

Replacements, Ltd. achieved their remarkable customer growth and loyalty because they invested in the technology and services they needed to keep their promises to customers. And 10 million is a good number of customers for a company started in an attic.

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