Responding to Customer’s Complaints and Suggestions

Small business CEOs are serious about keeping customers. This past week we were discussing my column that drew some lessons from JCPenney’s experience. Then they raised questions about how to respond to customer’s complaints and issues. That is an excellent topic. So in this column I will try to give some specific examples of how the CEO might follow-up.

Good customer service is about getting the basics right. If you answer inquiries quickly and sincerely, you'll build a reputation of being responsive and your customers will feel that they can reach out to you when there's an issue. Excellent customer service, however, goes beyond the basics and can greatly differentiate you from your competition. One simple way to do this is to perfect "the follow-up."

Let’s use your email responses as the framework. It will come in various forms including a customer support solution, a product or services inquiry, feedback, or any other type of communication. Not every type of follow-up is right for every situation or for every business. But here are a few response situations and suggestions:

**A Customer has a complaint but clearly doesn’t understand the situation:** If you can't deliver, your customers interpret the failure based on their outsider’s knowledge of your industry. If a package isn't delivered on time, the customer imagines a dismissive guy who was too lazy to make it to the post office. The reality may be an unavoidable logistical problem, and there are benefits to explaining that.

Once the issue is resolved, it's worth following up to explain to your customer the steps you've taken. Describe not only what happened and how you rectified the issue, but also how you’ll avoid it in the future. This gives the customer some insight into your business and the challenges you've overcome.

**A customer suggestion merits acknowledgment:** Consider the customer who sends an email with some feedback about your business. Maybe your website has a typo or needs a user-experience improvement. It's likely that you'll take action, because you care. When you do—even if you make the changes a few weeks later—let that customer know. You'll demonstrate that you appreciate and value the feedback, and it gives the customer recognition for helping you improve. That, in turn, confers an emotional ownership to the customer and builds real loyalty.

**Invite the customer to be a part of the solution:** Not everything can be solved by the customer support folks on your team. Sometimes, they will need to pass the issue on to an engineer, developer, salesperson or CEO. In this case, don't pass the customer off to someone else. Bring the customer along.

First, before sharing the issue with a colleague, let the customer know you're doing so and introduce the customer to the next team member they'll be interacting with. Explain who the new person is, what they do, and how you think they can help. This shows genuine concern for the customer and a humble commitment to making sure the right person does the job.

After the issue is resolved, a note to check in is a great way to show the customer that you didn't pass the buck, but rather handled the issue in an inclusive way. This makes your customer think, "Wow, they have a few people working on solving this for me." This is infinitely better than a buck-passing, and turns your team into your customer’s team.
Lastly, it is always a good idea to “stay in touch” with a customer that has given you some feedback: This is a really easy way to show you care. A one- or two-sentence note to a customer is a brilliant way to show you value them: "Hey, I was thinking of you. Even though your concerns were addressed a couple weeks ago, I wanted to just check in. I'm standing by if you have any questions or thoughts."

Remember, responding to customers is key to keeping them and it’s not an all-or-nothing approach. Just do what you can, when you can, and soon following up will become a valuable habit.

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