You Can Win Back Lost Clients

“Clients (customers) leave—it’s a fact of business life. No matter how much you bend over backward to keep them, a client will likely leave you at some point.” This comment comes from a CEO that by his 35th birthday had founded and sold two multi-million dollar companies. Mike Michalowicz is now running his third million dollar venture, is a former small business columnist for The Wall Street Journal and other publications, is a business author (one of my favorites) and a key note speaker.

So, Mike, can you hope to get those lost clients back? He suggests that losing a client doesn’t have to be permanent, and how you handle that client’s decision to move on can make all the difference in the long run. The moment they break up with you can also be your chance to successfully set yourself up to win back their business. Here are a few of his suggestions.

1. Be gracious and grateful for the business you’ve received.

Mike starts from the beginning, “When a client tells me they’ve decided to move on, I genuinely and sincerely thank them for their business. My goal is to be the classiest guy they’ve ever fired, and I do it for a couple of reasons. First, it’s the right thing to do. Second, folks make business decisions for all sorts of reasons—reasons I can’t control. Maybe the guy’s brother-in-law just started a company that provides the same services I do. Maybe they’re going to try out a cheaper alternative. Whatever the reason for their departure, I’m polite, appreciative and—here’s the key—I ask if it’s OK to stay in touch. I’ve never been turned down.”

2. Maintain the relationship.

So your client’s gone, but they’ve agreed you can stay in touch. Once a quarter, you could give them a call or shoot them an email to see how they’re doing. You don’t ask for their business; just simply check in. Mike says, “If I see their company in the newspaper, I’ll cut the article out and mail them a copy along with my congratulations. (The old-school, snail mail approach sticks in their minds—in a good way.)” The goal is to keep the lines of communication open, just in case things change down the road.

3. Make the transition easy.

Mike relates an example, “I’ve moved my accounting business from one firm to another on a couple of different occasions. The first accountant I left made the process a nightmare. He refused to share information in a timely fashion and made everything three times more difficult than it needed to be. Years later, I switched my business from a wonderful accountant to another for personal reasons. The accountant I was leaving couldn’t have been more helpful in the transition, sending along all my records and making the transition seamless. When I needed to move my accounting business again, I went back to the second guy—the one who’d been a consummate professional.”
4. **Conduct an exit interview.**

   Your client might be leery of taking the time to sit down with you after they’ve announced their plan to take their business elsewhere. But this isn’t about keeping their business. The goal of the exit interview is to improve your service to your other customers and to improve on any areas your departing client might have been disappointed in. If you’ve worked closely with the departing client, you may want to have an employee or colleague conduct the exit interview so your client can feel free to be brutally honest about your company. This can be an opportunity to find out what you can do to improve.

5. **Never say “I told you so.”**

   In the event that your client does return to you, a good practice is to be humble, gracious and focused on the excellent service that you’re going to have the privilege of providing. Price shoppers abound these days, and customer loyalty can be hard to earn and even harder to keep. Taking a long, hard look at the quality and value of the services your company provides can help keep you both honest and relevant in your marketplace.

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