Enhance Your Customer’s Experience

My observation as a small business mentor is that it seems that it is getting easier and easier to start a business -- that’s the good news. Unfortunately, with low barriers to entry comes tons of competition, so it becomes harder to distinguish your business and win customers.

Recently, I had the opportunity to interact with Dana Brownlee regarding the challenge faced by small businesses to attract customers and keep them for the long pull. Dana is an entrepreneur with a service-based business (corporate training/keynote speaking). Having run a small business over the past decade, Dana Brownlee is an advocate for helping other small businesses succeed. She is president of Atlanta-based training company, Professionalism Matters and is an acclaimed keynote speaker, corporate trainer and team development consultant.

We agreed that as small-business owners, we sometimes feel we can’t relate or even learn from major Fortune 100 companies. So how does a small business CEO glean customer service best practices from the best and incorporate them into your business? Maybe small business can take advantage of their “being small businesses’. Ms Brownlee gave me a couple of good reminders and suggestions.

**Develop a habit of addressing customers by name.** She related reading somewhere years ago that everyone’s favorite word is their own name (whether they realize it or not), so it makes lots of sense that smart businesses have learned to incorporate this small (free) practice into their business processes -- whether it’s a face-to-face interaction, email, newsletter, etc.

Dana used these examples. “Two companies that taught me this lesson are Disney and Pure Barre. When our family went on our first Disney Cruise, one of the things that both surprised and impressed me was the fact that as you walk onto the ship after initial registration, they ask you your family name then proceed to announce you on a loud microphone, “Now welcoming the Brownlee Family...” As you walk in, they simulate a red carpet, replete with paparazzi, teeming with Disney reps applauding your arrival. It’s a seemingly simple step but an amazing way to make customers feel special. Similarly, I’m so impressed how consistently Pure Barre staff call me by name -- whether it’s walking in or out of the studio or during class -- it’s very intentional … and smart in my book. I think that calling people by name creates a bit of an instant bond, and bonding with potential customers is a good thing for sure.”
Avoid nickel and diming the customer. Have you ever encountered a company whose terms and conditions are really restrictive or they have additional fees for every little thing so much so that you’re just turned off and don’t want to do business with them? And the opposite is true as well, once you experience a “no questions asked” free and easy return policy, you’re not only impressed but may also feel a sense of gratitude and loyalty towards that company.

Dana related that “recently, I sent my mom flowers from Pro Flowers and my mom said that a few were dead. I emailed them to let them know and before I could send a follow up email with pictures (to prove it), they’d already responded to apologize and ask whether I wanted a refund or second delivery at no charge. Similarly, I’m always impressed when I call Constant Contact’s customer service (invariably because I’m struggling with a newsletter) and they don’t just answer my question, but also ask permission to edit the newsletter for me -- yes, as an entrepreneur trying to get that newsletter out, that’s what I need! I’ve been told about other email marketing applications that are cheaper, but Constant Contact’s service is so great … I’m likely a customer for life.”

The key here is to think long-term relationship-building, not short-term profitability when determining the fine print on your pricing, service plans, etc. Of course, any entrepreneur has to be smart and ensure their basic pricing structure or business model is profitable (or there won’t be a business for very long), but when you’re thinking about the details around shipping, returns, cancelations, etc., try to avoid nickel and diming. Instead adopt policies that would make you come back as a customer.

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