Your Growth Plan Needs to Begin with Building Trust

In my last column, I suggested several characteristics that often give small businesses an edge over bigger competitors. The first one was a “personal touch” with clients/customers. Small business owners have ample opportunities to develop face-to-face, person-to-person relationships with prospects and clients. I challenged CEOs to start with this advantage and come up with one specific thing that they can implement now to begin a plan for growth.

Leaders of small, local businesses are generally more accessible than those at bigger more broadly dispersed companies. In short, this really boils down to building trust. In my experience this is a vital key to successful sales and building your growth plan.

Making the sale, especially when your small business offers products and services to other businesses, demands more than being good at what you do. It also requires building professional relationships. To do that, you must earn your customers’ trust.

There’s no scientific formula for earning trust. It requires time, patience, and honest effort. So here are some suggestions to help you lay a foundation of trust with your potential customers:

- **Engage in a conversation, not a sales pitch.**
  A hard-sell approach can make a bad first impression, so don’t come on too strong at networking events. Show interest in learning about your prospects’ businesses. Demonstrate curiosity—listen to them more than you talk about yourself. Ask questions and learn about their situations and challenges before jumping in with how wonderful your products and services are.

- **Be prepared.**
  No matter your reason for meeting with prospects or customers, always prepare in advance so you’re respecting their time and demonstrating that you care about meeting their needs.

- **Have their best interests in mind—always.**
  When proposing solutions to customers, make sure you’re directing them to those that are truly most beneficial to them. If you don’t have a solution at a price point a customer needs, be honest.
• Keep your promises.
When you tell your customers that you’ll do something for them, make sure you deliver on your promises. Finish what you start, follow up when you say you will, meet deadlines, and ensure that the solutions you’ve provided meet the expectations you’ve given your customers.

• Don’t disrespect your competition.
Badmouthing competitors will likely make you appear unprofessional and petty—and it probably won’t make your products and services seem any more attractive to prospective customers.

• Go the extra mile.
You can also earn trust by doing more than just fulfilling your business obligations to your clients. Whether emailing them a link to a blog post that touches on a topic you were discussing with them at your last meeting, writing recommendations of them on LinkedIn, or referring a potential customer to them, you can show you genuinely care about their success.

The common thread binding all of the above trust-earning tips is putting the customer first. By approaching your interactions with an authentic effort to help rather than sell, you can build goodwill and gain the trust needed to make your business relationships a win-win.

Whether your company is business-to-business, business-to-consumer, or some combination of the two, communication is key to building relationships with your customers and clients.

The trust they have in you and your company will keep clients coming back to your services. I will give you some specific suggestions on this topic in my next column.

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