

Bring disappearing 'nice' patrons back

Business Growth Accelerators
 Get great reviews from unhappy customers: Part 8

If you're just joining us, we're learning that customer complaints represent an opportunity to turn "the angry man into a raving fan." Last time, we talked about the modus operandi of dissatisfied "nice" customers who disappear without a peep. We'll finish this series by learning how to identify them and bring them back.



Dan Elder

Bringing back "nice" customers

Effective follow-up can pay big dividends in general and for nice customers, in particular. If your customer has had a problem and you resolve it for them, the chances are they will tell five people about the situation and how well you handled it for them.

However, nice customers never announce themselves when they go away, so identifying those who have disappeared requires you to be proactive.

You must routinely review your customer database — you do have a database containing basic customer contact info, don't you? — and notice that particular customers haven't made a purchase in a while.

These may be your nice customers who you've lost or are in danger of losing. Take the first step by sending them the following letter on your corporate letterhead:

"We haven't seen you in a while, (insert name)..."

"We noticed that it's been a while since you've been in. I hope your absence isn't due to a bad experience or anything we have done poorly.

"We certainly value your business and friendship, and hope to be able to continue serving your (insert product name) needs in the future.

"My personal goal is to offer the very best service possible and I depend on people like you to help us do that. Would you take a moment to give me your honest feedback, so that I'll know what needs to be done to provide better service to our customers?"

"I've enclosed a post-paid reply card for your convenience.

"Thanks very much. We've enjoyed doing business with you and appreciate your help with this survey to help us continue to improve our service.

"We hope to see you back soon."

Your signature, using your common name

The included post-paid postcard should have three or four simple questions with free-form space to answer each. The questions could be:

1. "We are no longer doing business with your company because ..."

2. "We have the following thoughts or comments about our experience with your company ..."

3. A spot for name and contact info, clearly marked "optional," because getting the information is more important than the identity of the sender.

You won't get every card back (especially from "nice" customers), so you'll want to track each carefully and follow up if they aren't returned.

Whatever you do, be sure to call and follow up on all returned cards, regardless of whether the comments were positive or negative.

When you do this, it shows your customers you take their comments seriously and really care about them, not as a complaint but as a real person with real concerns.

Your follow-up efforts also let them know you value their business and are leaving the door open for them to return, as well as welcoming others

they may refer to you.

Your follow-up questionnaire and phone call, after solving a problem or handling a complaint, can be one of the hallmarks of your business.

This program will enable you to find out what kind of service you provided at the time it matters most — after your customer has had a complaint. It will also help identify problems you wouldn't have known about in any other way.

position, but would like to have them back if things don't work out.

You might not like what you hear from your customers, but this one suggestion will be worth whatever time and effort you put into it if you want to get a handle on your business and close the back door your nice customers are leaving through.

The bottom line

As I shared in the first column in this series, you always know a few businesses that have a steady supply of customers. Rain or shine, economy up or economy down, they stay busy. Learning to address the concerns of dissatisfied customers will turn them into raving fans who can do that for your business.

How does what I've shared in this series compare with your experience? Did I hit the nail on the head or hit my thumb? I'll look forward to your feedback at results@bgaccelerators.com.

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When all else fails

Even if you can't keep every dissatisfied customer from leaving, you can use their feedback to identify areas where your business might be deficient, areas that, if corrected, might keep others from leaving.

The methods I've outlined will give you that information.

Finally, take your medicine and don't burn bridges if a customer decides to leave. Often a customer will leave because they've found a "better deal" somewhere else, only to come back to you later because the "better deal" wasn't really a better deal after all.

You stand a better chance of getting your customers back by allowing them to leave on good terms and letting them know you understand their

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