
Four Ways To Provide Customer Service That Outshines Your Competitors

Part 1: Bring Them Back with Shiny Customer Service

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There's no real secret to getting your customers to come back. All you need to do is provide customer service that exceeds your customers' expectations and outshines your competitors' customer service.

Acumen Research Group surveyed more than 1,000 Canadian retail, banking and telco customers to determine what made them behave loyally and what made them leave long-term relationships; 43 percent of respondents abandoned a provider to which they declared themselves loyal because of a negative experience with a staff person, and 30 percent of respondents reported that having the feeling they are not treated as valued customers by the staff has been the main reason for taking their business elsewhere. ("Keep Them Coming Back" by Joan A. Pajunen in Canadian Retailer).

Shiny customer Service is service with a capital "S", Service that makes your customer feel special, Service that makes him or her want to come back and do more business with your company, and recommend your business to his or her friends.

So how can you provide customer Service that shines? Follow this plan to ensure customer service that will dazzle customers and competitors alike:

1) Determine what makes what you offer special.

Study the competition. Think about their customer service and the customer service you provide. What can you offer your customers that is "better" than the competition? There are sure to be aspects of your customer Service that you can promote as "Special".

Make a list of all these ideas for providing customer service. If you sell a product, and your competitor doesn't offer it already, perhaps you can offer free local delivery. If you sell a service, such as bookkeeping or accounting, perhaps you can focus on turnaround times that are faster than your competitors'- providing the good customer service that will give your business the edge.

Sometimes providing customer Service that shines will involve expanding your operations. For instance, you may need to offer to provide your services in customer's homes to outdo the services the competition provides.

Sometimes providing customer Service that shines will involve revamping what you've always done. If you provide a service that involves giving estimates of the job to be done beforehand, and you've previously just given estimates to prospective customers orally, you could stress that you provide an estimate in writing and stick to your written estimate. Remember, we're talking about customer Service here. Lower prices are not service; they're just lower prices.

Now that you have a list of customer service ideas that you might use to provide customer service that outshines the customer service your competitors provide, it's time to look at implementing shiny customer service.

2) Study the customer service ideas on your list and examine their feasibility.

Can you really guarantee that you will always stick to your written estimate or provide a faster turnaround time than your competitors? If you aren't sure, or can't do it, cross it off your customer service ideas list. Sleep Country Canada's delivery people always wear their booties; Sears always honours their guarantee. Customer service that shines carries that same kind of guarantee; it's not a "sometimes" proposition. So only choose what you can definitely do one hundred percent of the time.

3) Choose one or two of your shiny customer service ideas and implement them.

When I say implement your customer service ideas, I don't just mean do it; you also need to let people know that you're doing it. Feature this aspect of your customer service in whatever ads you run, including your yellow pages listing. Put it on your business cards and in your email signature. Make it part of your greeting spiel when you answer the phone.

What's on the front of every Sears catalog besides a picture, their logo, and their phone number? "We're always open! Prices guaranteed until..." Sears emphasizes its customer service on every catalogue cover. You need to make your customer service a prominent feature of every ad too, so people automatically associate it with your business. (Remember when you're redesigning or creating ads never to describe your customer service as "new and improved"; this implies there was something wrong with your "old" customer service.)

While one of the big payoffs of your shiny customer service will be the great word-of-mouth advertising it generates, this takes time, and you need to help it along by getting the word out. Don't be shy! Solicit customer service testimonials from satisfied customers, that you can use in print ads, such as in newspapers, ezines, and on your website, if you have one, or can at least use as references for new potential customers.

4) Stay proactive and keep gathering customer service ideas.

Neither Sears nor Sleep Country Canada have achieved their success by doing the same thing for the last thirty years, or by simply reacting to customer complaints. Listen to your customers and find out what kind of special customer service they want. You can do this formally, by creating a customer satisfaction feedback form that you enclose with every sale or post on your website, or informally, by asking them for their customer service ideas when they're in your store or office. Shiny customer service is service that's responsive to customers' needs.

Customers are tired of dealing with retailers that ignore customer service or only pretend to have it, and as always, they're voting with their dollars. Shiny customer Service will draw customers to your product or service, rather than a competitors', and bring them back in droves.