

# Listen, Learn and Improve



By Stan Pohmer

**W**e all know that the key to keeping customers loyal over the long haul isn't just about having good or even great products; there are other retailers, both brick and mortar and online, that can compete equally with you.

The major differentiator is all about the comparative experiences you provide in every contact opportunity you have with each customer. And by contact, I mean everything associated with your business, whether it is physical, something they read (including signage and "how-to" materials you provide), phone calls, your displays and merchandising, your staff, the condition of your restrooms, the carts you have for customer convenience and web/social media content ... anything and everything. And you work diligently to deliver the best experience possible every day.

Just when your sales start to get rolling and you're racing to keep up with the increased product demand and keeping the displays filled, you have some unhappy customers coming into your store complaining about something; and all we can see is some pesky, irritating individual who is taking precious time away from your ability to get your real job done.

I'll wager that almost every customer who makes a dedicated trip back to your store to complain about the performance (or lack thereof) of a product or service you sold them, or their inability to finish the activity they were working on, is for something that we can resolve fairly quickly.

In fact, chances are the complaint could have been avoided in the first place, during the original purchase experience, by providing the customer with the right information and guidance before they left the store.

## The Complaining Customer

Contrary to popular belief, 99.9 percent of complaining customers aren't out to screw you financially or make your life difficult, but they are looking for someone to show them how to be more successful.

But in the heat of battle, we don't always look at it this way.

Listening to, and resolving, customer complaints is a prime opportunity to learn about their

problems so we can improve the purchase and user experience for all of our customers.

Motivational speaker Zig Ziglar stated, "Statistics suggest that when customers complain, business owners and managers ought to get excited about it. The complaining customer represents a huge opportunity for more business."

I might add that we should embrace the complaining customers because they are concerned enough to voice their issues and give us the opportunity to rectify the situation and retain them as future purchasers. And, if we handle their issues properly and resolve their complaints to their satisfaction, they can become advocates or apostles for your store, the very best form of advertising.

It's the complaints you never hear that will kill your business.

Studies show that, in addition to losing the customer who had an unresolved complaint, 51 percent of consumers don't shop a particular store as a result of hearing about a negative shopping experience from someone else ... someone who either never told us about a problem they had or one where we didn't do the right thing by them to resolve their issues.

One of my favorite business philosophers, Harvey Mackey, says it best, "There's one thing no business has enough of ... customers. Take care of the customers you've got, and they'll take care of you."

## The Opportunity

Most retailers look at complaints as a necessary evil that they reluctantly have to deal with, rather than the tremendous opportunity they are to learn, to gather input and to get feedback.

Granted there are some complainers who are chronic pains and add no value, but if you categorize all complainers in the same barrel, you'll never be able to improve.

So, what is a customer with a complaint actually looking for or expecting?

- A simple, quick, efficient and effective process of voicing their concern or issue (you can't remedy a non-reported complaint)
- Talking with someone who has empathy and a real concern with the customer as a human being; someone who shows them some respect and values their input

- Someone who doesn't try to trivialize the problem
- Talking with someone who has the authority to respond and resolve the problem
- A fair settlement
- Speed in resolution

The good news is that if the customer feels that the complaint process is handled well — meaning if the complaint is acknowledged (even if it can't be resolved to their 100 percent satisfaction), if they take away some sense that something is being done so the problem won't happen to them or someone else again, if the process is handled quickly and doesn't drag on, if there's some sort of effort on the part of the company to demonstrate concern for the inconvenience caused — then there's a high likelihood that this complaining customer can be salvaged for the future and they won't bad-mouth you to others.

**It's the complaints you never hear that will kill your business.**

Statistically, 54 to 70 percent of complainers will do business with you if the complaint is handled well, and 95 percent will do business with you again if the complaint is also handled quickly.

If the customer sees that you have taken their complaint seriously and viewed it as a suggestion for improvement, and actually do something about it so their complaint will positively impact them and other customers, you've got that "apostle" that I mentioned earlier who will laud you to all who will listen (and some who don't even want to hear it).

Complaints, opportunities to listen, learn and improve to enhance the customers' experience ...

**LGR**

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