

# GIVING THANKS

Pairing together the technology you have at hand with a simple "thank you" note can go a long way in helping you pinpoint and retain your best customers.

By Gail Vanik

**T**here has been a great deal of talk recently about customer retention. Every retailer knows that it's far easier to keep an existing customer than find a new one, but is there an easy way to do that using the technology you already have in-house? With marketing budgets in check, the answer to keeping your customers coming back may be at your fingertips in the form of using what equipment is already available to you along with your POS system, should you have one.

Although we use our POS system in a myriad of ways, aside from inventory management, one of the best and most cost-effective things we do with it is to use it to manage our customer base from a CRM (Customer Relationship Management) standpoint to keep our best customers coming back. A relatively small investment in a custom written CRM program for our POS system has reaped huge rewards over the years in helping us to identify our largest spenders or most frequent shoppers and treat them well.

For a moment, think about the best experiences you've had when visiting other retail stores. Were you made to feel welcome? Were you thanked? Did they go "above and beyond" in some aspect of their service? Did they surprise and delight you in some unexpected way? Then think about what makes you feel welcome when you visit a friend's home. Were you invited in? Were you offered something to make the visit pleasant? Was there a

conversation that created a personal feeling?

We utilize the technology we already have at hand to blend these two experiences into one, particularly for our higher spending customers. One easy thing we do is that, on a weekly basis, a list of all customers spending over a certain amount is pulled and printed from our POS system. What amount constitutes "large" may vary by week, month or season. I try to set it as low as practically possible — how many notes can I physically write in a week without being overwhelmed?

After the list is generated, each person on the list receives a personally hand written "thank you" note. Although it's an old fashioned way of saying "thank you," it does help to let the customer know you are aware of them as something more than a sales total at the end of the day and that you appreciate their business. How effective this is might also depend on the area in which you do business. In our rural, old fashioned farm and ranch community, the impact of the thank you notes is huge. Even in our more upscale and urban Telluride neighbor, they are well received.

The beauty of the program I have is, that since my POS will not only tell me what they spent but also what they purchased, I am easily able to make a mention of that product in the note, which then helps to reference and personalize that customer's experience. It can also become a conversation starter the next time they visit.

## Making a List; Checking it Twice

At the end of the year, right before the Christmas/Holiday season begins, the technology that the POS provides and our in-house color laser printing capability becomes even more essential to our marketing plan. Each October, I go into the POS again, and pull a yearly list of our largest spenders in two tiers. The sales figures that year will determine where those levels are set.

High end, quality holiday cards are purchased. I believe that it is important to use the best quality you can find or afford because that in itself, conveys a message. They are hand addressed with a personal message written inside by myself.

A postcard is also included in the card. Postcards are purchased at the local office supply store and are inexpensive to produce. These are generated in-house using the color laser printer at very little cost with simple graphics which are seasonally appropriate. They thank the customer for their patronage and as our way of saying "thank you for your patronage over the past year," invites

them, as one of our premier customers, to take advantage of a special offer. The first tier premier customers will receive one offer and the higher tier premier customers will receive that offer plus an additional incentive.

Usually the offer contains a discount or free merchandise with a purchase, but is always something substantial enough to let the customer know that we are sincerely grateful for their business.

This gives us a final opportunity that year to let our customers know that they have been thought about at a time other than in the spring when they may have made their large purchases and invite them to visit with us in our business home through the holidays. Since we always have homemade cookies and hot beverages on hand, along with a comfy couch on which to sit and visit, it creates a homelike and welcoming atmosphere. It's a simple, heartfelt way to combine a business transaction with a personal interaction. It's also an easy way to use the technology and equipment we already have on hand, at little cost, to create a personal message for our customers.

Whatever you may choose to do doesn't have to be difficult or even expensive. Depending on how you use it, your POS system and the information it provides can become your marketing department's best friend. Learn to use and push the technology you already have in-house — such as color printers, banner printers, even copiers — coupled with inexpensive internet tools such as Constant Contact, social media and other methods, to become creative and stretch marketing dollars as well as your commitment to customer service. If you've already got it and have paid for it, then use it. I love to find new ways to push our systems to give me even more information, and dream up creative, inventive, innovative and inexpensive ways to use all of it together.

Using the technology at hand to produce a simple "thank you" goes a long way in building loyalty and it may help you pinpoint and retain your best customers while freeing up marketing dollars to look for those sometimes elusive new ones. 🌸

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