



Delivering a great experience shouldn't stop when the customer leaves your store — keep it going to build a loyal, repeat-purchase customer base.



By Stan Pohmer

Over the past two years, I've talked a lot about the critical importance of providing positive "experiences" to the customers in your stores — experiences that touch all of their senses and emotions that will satisfy their needs and make you top of mind whenever they are in the market for our products again.

And this all-encompassing approach to meeting and exceeding the expectations of your customer includes anything and everything involved in what enticed them to come to you in the first place (marketing), your company mission and value position/statement, the products you sell, your facilities, the way you sign and merchandise your displays, how convenient it is to get in and out, being respectful of their time ... in essence, every component of what is the foundation of your brand and brand image.

In today's ultra-competitive marketplace, where any retailer can sell something to a customer once, it takes a laser-like focus to deliver the type of total experience that brings that customer back again and again!

Build Loyalty

Delivering a great experience doesn't have to stop when the customer leaves your store, goods in hand. Think of the opportunities to enhance the customer's enjoyment with their purchase — things that will help improve their quality of life. For example, last year I purchased four large hibiscus trees from a locally owned garden center (where I am a member of their loyalty club, with my contact info on file with them).

At the time of purchase, they provided me with a handout on how-to-plant and care instructions, but the extra touch that enhanced my already great experience were the timely system-driven follow up emails throughout the year reminding me when/how to prune, and when to fertilize the plants I purchased from them.

Here's another example. I recently purchased a national branded high-end gas grill, one that is carried by both the big boxes and local retailers. This brand is never discounted, and all the retailers offered free assembly. I elected to purchase it from a locally-owned Ace Hardware franchisee, which also offered free delivery within a 10-mile radius of the store.

While the product and delivery service met my expectations, what blew my experience quotient with this retailer off the chart was a short hand-written note a few days after delivery thanking me for my purchase that also

included the owner's cell phone number to call in the event I had any problems with my grill's performance. Oh, and the note included a \$10 future purchase coupon as a thank you incentive to shop them again.

I'm not suggesting that you can do these "over and above" experience enhancers with every customer on every purchase, but if you start thinking with a lifetime value strategic mentality, you'll build a loyal, repeat-purchase customer base. I guarantee you that I'll be shopping at these two retailers again because of the exceptional post-purchase experiences they provided to me!

Relationship Goals

As I mentioned in my August 2020 column, in which I explained Krulak's Law of Leadership, we rely heavily on our front-line team members, the lowest-paid employees in your store who have the most direct contact with your customers, to deliver your brand message and experience to them. These employees truly are the face of

your brand and are arguably the most critical component of executing your customer experience strategy.

But will these employees have the positive attitudes needed to be the best ambassadors of your brand and deliver the best experiences to your customers if they don't feel appreciated, or feel overworked and overwhelmed, and aren't given the tools and resources to perform their responsibilities to the highest level possible? It makes perfect sense that, if you expect them to deliver exceptional experiences, then they themselves should also enjoy great experiences with you as their employer.

And, while important, compensation isn't what drives their positive experiences working with your company; being respected as individuals, asking for their opinions, mentoring them, providing increasing responsibilities and challenging work, sharing goals and financial results, and recognizing their contributions to these results are all things that you can do

to help your front-line employees feel appreciated and part of the store team.

We often take for granted the strength and benefits of a solid, long-term relationship with our business partners, namely service providers (including lenders) and product suppliers. And it's not unusual to forget that relationships work in two directions; there's a mutual need on the part of both parties to make a relationship work.

Typically, as the buyer or customer for the services or products, we expect to receive great experiences/services from our vendors, and those vendors or service providers that deliver the exceptional experiences gain a more secure and larger share of our business. But do we ever think about what kind of experiences we provide to our suppliers? And the relationship between two companies goes far beyond that of just the buyer and the salesperson; it encompasses the interaction of all of your team members — your A/P staff and your receiving team, for example — and business activities such as receiving product (how long do you keep trucks waiting?), do you pay on time?

From my experience, when product is in short supply in the market, or you need that unplanned shipment to get you through a busy weekend, or a grower has some extra product they want to deal on, the store that has provided the best experiences and developed the strongest overall relationship will generally get the deals and high demand products before another store that doesn't have the same level of relationship.

Successful retailers have learned this simple equation and use it as a foundational tenet of their business model: positive experiences = stronger relationships = loyalty and trust. And they recognize that experiences are multi-directional — what they provide to others and what they expect from others, and the opportunities are limitless on so many levels ... 🌸

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