



**BY STAN POHMER**

If a customer sees that you have taken his or her complaint and viewed it as a suggestion for improvement, if he or she sees you actually do something about it ... you've got an "apostle" that will laud you to all who will listen.

# BRING ON THE COMPLAINTS!

How do you deal with customer complaints?

We all know the drill...we see an unhappy customer complaining about something to someone else in the store, and we tend to turn around and head in a different direction. "Boy, these pesky, irritating customers make my job difficult; if I didn't have to deal with these whiners, my job would almost be tolerable."

Sound familiar? Deep down I think we all share at least some of these feelings because we hate conflict and often don't have the tools or power to address the issues complaining customers are bringing to us. But we need to start remembering and understanding that retail isn't really about the product. It's fundamentally about customers and the experiences they have with products...their buying experiences and the way they're treated.

## The Complaining Customer

Noted author and 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." And I might add that we should embrace 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. If you 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. That someone else usually either never mentioned his or her problem or thought a complaint was not resolved properly. Harvey Mackey, one of my favorite plain-talking, grass roots business philosophers, said 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."

Most retailers look at complaints as a necessary evil they reluctantly have to deal with rather than the tremendous opportunity to learn, gather input and get feedback. Granted there are some complainers who are chronic pains and add no value, but if you categorize all complainants in the same barrel, you'll never be able to improve.

The scary part of this is that most retailers are totally unaware of the scope of their customer dissatisfaction problem...or are in denial about it; 98 percent of businesses surveyed in one study believed company service levels were "above average" or higher but had no way of quantitatively measuring or verifying that they were, in fact, meeting the expectations of their customers.

## Complaint Categories

Complaints can be boiled down to two "failure" (as viewed through the customer's eyes) categories:

1. the core products or services do not meet customer expectations, or

2. the core products or services are delivered or executed poorly.

The first category relates to the concept of over-promising and under-delivering, causing a major disconnect in the expectation/reality equation. It may be a product quality issue, a price value perception issue, a problem with a landscape installation or bad advice from a salesperson.

The second category might include slow checkout; lack of salesperson expertise or availability; poor layout or lack of logical product adjacencies; or a lack of shopping carts/wagons to allow customers to easily move their purchased products from the displays to their cars.

One of the major hurdles in using customer complaints to learn, improve and win over dissatisfied customers is company culture. Very few companies have established procedures or processes to deal with customer complaints beyond standard returns, exchanges and refunds. In fact, most companies make it very difficult to complain, so we can never learn to improve on what caused the unhappiness in the first place, a lost opportunity.

We make contacting us or the "right" person difficult. We don't take the time to listen to what they have to say or what the real underlying problem is, and we use delay tactics to resolve the problem in hope that customers will just go away. Unfortunately, most times they go away mad, never come back and bad-mouth your company to anyone who will listen.

## Customer Expectations

So what are customers with complaints actually looking for or expecting?

- A simple, quick, efficient and effective process of voicing their concerns or issues.

- 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 of the problem (most customers aren't trying to take unfair advantage of the retailer and likewise don't expect to be taken advantage of).

- A speedy resolution.

The good news is that if the customer feels that the complaint process was handled well — if it is acknowledged (even if it can't be resolved to their 100-percent satisfaction), if they feel something is being done so it won't happen

again, if it is handled quickly and if the retailer demonstrates concern for the inconvenience caused — there is a high likelihood that this complaining customer can be salvaged for the future and he or she won't bad-mouth you to others.

Statistically, 54-70 percent of complainers will continue doing business with you if the complaint is handled well, and 95 percent will do business with you again if the complaint is handled quickly. If a customer sees that you have taken his or her complaint and viewed it as a suggestion for improvement, if he or she sees you actually do something about it that will make a positive impact, you've got an "apostle" that will laud you to all who will listen (and some who don't even want to hear it).

## Turning Lemons Into Lemonade

Here are some things to think about that can help turn complaint lemons into opportunity lemonade:

- It takes a real commitment from the management team and a change in the company's culture to

change the internal attitude on how to deal with complaints. Change your outlook from complaints being evil and unpleasant encounters to one of "Now I've got a chance to strut my stuff and show them what I'm made of!" If you demonstrate the importance and walk the talk, your team will follow you; if you don't make the commitment and support the complaint resolution decisions your team members make, you'll never change for the better.

- Whatever it takes, do what's right for the customer. This doesn't mean giving away the family business, but be fair and considerate, giving customers the respect and empathy they deserve. Remember, they can exist without you, but you need them to exist.

- Train your team in complaint resolution, not just how to handle complaints.

- Empower your team to make the decisions to speed up the resolution process...and support their decisions. You may have to initially set some boundaries or limits for them, but over time and with experience, they will make good decisions on their own, expediting the resolution process. Trust that they have your best interests at heart and aren't out to cheat you.

- Be willing to learn from complaints and take positive action to improve. Understand that your customers visit far more competitors and other retail venues than you do, and they just might have a few nuggets you can learn from them.

I'm not suggesting that you actively solicit complaints from your customers (even though this is essentially what you might pay big bucks for in focus groups) but that you look at complaints as positive opportunities to salvage future customers. Have happy customers become your apostles, and learn something from them in the process. Remember, they can exist without you, but you need them to exist... ☺

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