

CUSTOMER SERVICE TOUCHPOINTS

Make every connection with every customer at your garden center count.

By Anne M. Obarski

In this world of “always open,” do your current customers and potential customers receive exceptional customer service at every possible point of connection 24/7?

I read recently that we are all part of a \$1.5 trillion “switching economy,” that is one click away from being tempted by the competition. Consumers used to be much more forgiving, often giving three strikes before you were out.

Now customers can leave with just one mistake, one blunt conversation or a slow website response.

Cable providers, car dealers and restaurants fill up commercial time on our TV programming and are relentless in trying to get our business. However, most of us may not change our business loyalties based on our suspicions that there will be a lack of consistency somewhere along the line with that new “provider,” so why bother?

Providing a relentlessly consistent customer experience will be the defining differential advantage in your business. It is not as easy as it sounds. Your customer knows you are human, but they have high expectations for you and your business at every step of their customer service experience journey.

Try to walk in their shoes and anticipate where there are speed bumps or cracks or detours in your garden center that could negatively affect your “touchpoint score.”

What's Your Score?

What is a “touchpoint score?” Customers rate companies based on their experiences with them at each and every touchpoint as they are doing business with you.

Let's use a simple coffee shop experience as an example. You drive up to your local

coffee shop drive-thru window. There are 10 cars in front of you, it is pouring rain and you really don't want to park your car. By the time you get to place your order, you are pretty frustrated.

The employee is very abrupt when you give him your order and you remind him you are in a hurry. He replies, “Yeah, so was everyone else ahead of you, and it is going to be a little longer because we have to brew a fresh pot. Pull over to the side and we will get it to you, but it might take longer, we have three people out sick.”

At this point you have given a grade or score to the coffee shop itself and to the employees, and it's probably not very high. How the next few experiences are “delivered” will make or break that score.

They can either exceed your expectations or continue with their consistently “poor” service. The first “touchpoint” was not with an employee but with a long line at the window.

Let's take a simple customer service journey and see where a laser focus on consistently delivering an outstanding customer service experience can affect “touchpoint” scores.

Consistent Marketing

Customers are likely to begin their journey by visiting your website or other social media channels.

Do your “friends” on social media feel they know you so well that they could recommend you because of that relationship? Your brand identity starts there and provides various ways to communicate.

How effective and efficient is your website? Do you consistently update it with the latest information, pictures, video and customer testimonials? How easily can they contact

you through those channels, and how fast is your response?

Unfortunately, you could lose a potential customer by having a poor website and you would never know. Your first touchpoint score could start right there.

Consistent Employee Performance

Each and every employee is the face of the business. From the office administrator to the sales force to a construction crew and service team, every single employee represents the company.

The number of employees does not matter; it is the relentless consistency in providing a memorable customer experience at each and every meeting that counts.

From your hiring process to your training and mentor program to your review process, each and every opportunity allows you to explain the importance of their daily job performance and how it affects the business.

As I travel across the country speaking for companies and associations in the green industry, I continually get asked the same question, “How do I find and retain good people?”

No matter what the industry, if you want to be a “talent magnet,” you need to run a business that people want to work for. Your leadership skills and managerial style are direct reflections on your employee turnover.

Ask your current employees to list three reasons why they like working for your company and the one thing that could make them leave.

The answers to those questions could be powerful in analyzing how you can be an even stronger talent magnet.

A client of mine in North Carolina recently

commented on Facebook, "Anne, I wish I could pay my people more, but I just can't. I believe the biggest reason that I have low turnover is the way in which I treat each and every one of them." Can you say the same?

Consistent Ethical Business Practices

People like doing business with people they trust. How do your clients describe you when it comes to your business?

As a leader, how do your employees describe you, and are they proud to work for you? How is the name of your company perceived within the community when they see your vehicles or your employees?

This touchpoint score can ruin a business faster than any of the others.

Consistent Follow-up

How often do you ask for feedback from your clients? I work with a large landscaper in Florida who has the policy that their people go back to commercial clients the next day to walk the property and discuss what work they had done and to get their feedback.

This company works relentlessly to make sure everything they do is consistently outstanding in the customer's mind and, if not, they are there

to make it right. Their follow-up is their brand identity and, because of that, their commercial business is one of the largest in Florida.

What is your company's "touchpoint score?" Customer service is your defining advantage.

It is the one main area that sets you apart from the competition. It is made up of countless touchpoints on a daily basis that inevitably create a "report card" in the customer's mind.

Don't you need it to always be an A+? **LGR**



Anne M. Obarski is an award-winning speaker, trainer, author and customer service strategist. She provides strategic "contagious" ideas to the companies she privately coaches and speaks to. They see their ecstatic repeat

customers referring others along the way as a result of their infectious, enviable, repeatable, remarkable and consistent customer service. She can be reached at anne@merchandiseconcepts.com, or visit www.merchandiseconcepts.com.

Meet Obarski, who will present two seminars, at New England GROWS in Boston, Massachusetts, Dec. 2-4, 2015.



New England GROWS Announces Program Highlights

New England GROWS is known for its innovative educational conference and world-class exposition. Beginning with its next event, the show will now take place the week after Thanksgiving: Dec. 2-4, 2015.

The annual event in Boston connects more than 10,000 of the region's top green industry professionals with leading suppliers from around the country and the globe. It is the Northeast's largest educational conference and green industry exposition. With an impressive speaker lineup and more than 50 educational offerings, horticulture professionals have plenty to choose from including:

- A Cornucopia of New Flowering Trees and Shrubs: Selection, Use & Culture with Michael Dirr, Ph.D., University of Georgia
- Finding Solutions to Customer Demands with Bruce Crawford, Rutgers Gardens
- Phyto Landscapes: Using Plants to Clean Up Polluted Water, Soil & Air with Kate Kennen, RLA, Offshoots Productive Landscapes
- Planting Choices for the Living Landscape with Rick Darke, Rick Darke, LLC
- New Annuals & Perennials for the New England Landscape with Mark Dwyer, Rotary Botanical Gardens
- The "X" Factor for Modern Customer Service with Anne Obarski, Merchandise Concepts
- Stone in the Garden with Gordon Hayward, Hayward Garden Design

In addition to in-depth conference sessions, interactive educational opportunities are available throughout the show on the expo floor. Attendees can pick up quick information hits at 15-minute Sprint Sessions; watch a raised, permeable patio take shape right before their eyes; or challenge themselves at the Plant ID contest.

GROWS exposition will have 500 of today's leading industry suppliers, ready to make deals, including special GROWS-only offers. Green industry professionals can check out the latest solutions, view demos and get hands-on access to the tools, plants and technology they need to grow their business.

To check out the full GROWS program, or to register, visit www.newenglandgrows.org.