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Customer Service for All Seasons

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When the economy sours, many businesses cut back on services they consider nonessential. The most shortsighted companies lump customer service into the “expendable” category.

What these businesses don’t understand is that consumers tend to remember the people and businesses that help them through tough times. It might be a business that provides a vital, one-time service or it might be a store the customer visits often, such as a grocery or hardware store.

The store that employs enough people to prevent backups in the checkout lines and to answer customers’ questions is the store most likely to survive a recession because it’s demonstrating a respect for its customers’ time and energy at a time when many stores are trying to limp along with skeleton crews.

In an economy struggling to right itself, just about any service business can distinguish itself from the competition by ramping up the customer service.

What constitutes service

In a global marketplace where local merchants are competing with Internet-based businesses around the world, outdoing the competition means offering customers good value for their limited dollars. That value includes the service and support the customer gets before, during and after the sale.

Customer service boils down to communication. Any business that deals with the public is usually only as successful as the first impression it makes on customers who visit the business or contact it by telephone or e-mail. Employees should be trained and empowered to help customers with all of their shopping needs, and managers should be close by to back up front-line workers as soon as the customer’s needs exceed their authority or expertise.

Businesses that rely on technology for sales or customer service need to be sure that online services and web sites are easy to understand and navigate. The best of these businesses distinguish themselves among competitors by providing telephone and online support — and it’s better still when the service people are based in local communities rather than in a country halfway around the world.

A world hungry for conflict resolution

Customers usually don't care what went wrong or why it went wrong when a product or service doesn't meet their expectations. They just want the problem fixed.

Businesses should make sure every employee is trained in conflict resolution skills and familiar with the business's return policies. Employees should understand that empathy goes a long way toward disarming an angry customer and that making excuses or trying to find fault only escalates conflict.

Dealing with unhappy customers is the least favorite part of the customer service job, but a business that can quickly solve problems or mistakes in a business transaction can defuse customer anger and often win a loyal, long-term customer.

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