

What's The Customer Service Buzz About Your Business?

By Tim Knox



If you're a regular reader of this column you know that my number one pet peeve is bad customer service. Nothing chaps my backside more than paying hard-earned money for a product or service only to have the provider of said product or service become apathetic, obnoxious or just downright rude after the transactional smoke has cleared.

The bottomline, my entrepreneurial friend, is this: it doesn't matter if your product is fast food, slow food, retail goods, computers, lawn mowers, books, real estate or automobiles, if a customer is willing to pay you good money in exchange for your product or service that customers deserves to be treated with gratitude and respect, before and after the sale.

Period. I'm constantly amazed at how many business owners and the frontline employees who represent them seem to forget this simple fact.

It's like the old saying about getting a little respect in the morning. If you court me before the sale, you damn well better respect me afterward. Just because you have my money in your pocket and I have your product in my hand, that does not mean that my needs have been fully satisfied or that my expectations have ceased to exist. To the contrary, our relationship is just getting started. It's up to you how well we will get along and how long our relationship will last.

Here's the point: customer service should not stop after the sale. In fact, customer support AFTER the sale can have greater impact on the success of your business than customer support before the sale.

Nothing generates negative buzz about a business like bad customer service, and nothing will drive nails in a business' coffin faster: news of bad customer service travels like lightning and spreads like wildfire. Think back to the last time you were on the receiving end of bad customer service. I'd be willing to bet that you immediately went out into the world and told everyone you met about the experience. You probably also warned them to "never do business with those &^%\$ or you'll get treated the same!"

As a business person, it should be your mission to make every customer a repeat customer, and one of the best ways to do that is by delivering superior customer service every time that customer comes through your door. Superior customer service leads to increased customer satisfaction, which leads to repeat business, which leads to customer loyalty. It is also much cheaper to keep a customer than to obtain a new one.

The fast food industry is especially prone to customer service problems. This is due in large part to the fact that every transaction is a face-to-face sale and the average

fast food worker is a disgruntled teenager who would rather be lying on a bed of nails than standing behind a fast food counter schlepping fries.

However, that doesn't always have to be the case. This is not meant as an ad for Chic Filet or as a slam at Taco Bell, but the difference in customer service between these two fast food titans is astounding.

I used to frequent both establishments (fast food is my crack), so this is the voice of experience speaking. Behind the counter at the local Chic Filet are young people who seem genuinely happy to be of service. They are clean cut and polite. They don't wear their baseball caps sideways or have anything visibly pierced. They look me in the eye, they smile like there is no place on earth they would rather be, and they ask for my order in clear, concise English. They thank me profusely and invite me to come again: excellent customer service after the sale.

Inversely, a recent trip to a local Taco Bell almost ended on an episode of *Cops* because the young lady behind the counter grew angry when I politely pointed out that my nachos were stale and asked for a fresh bag (pet peeve #132: stale nachos). Miss Mary Sunshine snatched the offending nachos from my hand and slam dunked them in a trash can, then tossed a replacement bag (which were also stale) on the counter in front of me. She then gave me a look that clearly said that if I had any further complaints she'd be happy to escort me outside to discuss them in detail. I like nachos, but not so much that I would risk getting my behind kicked by a disgruntled teenage girl wearing a sideways Taco Bell cap: not-so-excellent customer service after the sale.

Now, which restaurant do you think I will go to the next time I feel the need to feed my fast food monkey? And which restaurant do you think I enthusiastically recommend to my friends? The one that understands the importance of good customer service before and after the sale, of course.

The worst customer service experience I've ever had involved the purchase of a vehicle at a local used car lot. I purchased the used Ford Expedition on a Friday evening and when problems arose with the vehicle over the weekend, I went back to the dealership on Monday morning to speak with the sales manager. To say the least, the sales manager (who acted like my best friend on Friday) was not thrilled to see me on Monday. To make a very long story short, when I pointed out that he wasn't being very helpful after the sale he came around the desk yelling at the top of his lungs and waving his hands in my face. By the time the receptionist managed to calm him down, the sales manager had gone so far as to call me "a retarded idiot" (which may be considered redundant) and had instructed me to do something with the vehicle that I believe is anatomically impossible. It was an Expedition, I'm a little guy. Use your imagination.

Though the dealership owner later apologized and offered to take care of any problem I had, the damage to his business had already been done. The bad buzz machine started the second I left his lot.

Do you think I told everyone I met about my experience with that dealership? You bet your stale nachos I did. Do you think I will ever buy another car from that dealership? Not on your life. Do you think anyone I've told about the experience will buy a car from that dealership? Probably not. Do you think the owner and sales manager learned anything from the experience? We can only hope.

In the end, what is the value of great customer service before and after the sale? Priceless, my friend. Simply priceless.

Now, can somebody please get me some fresh nachos...

Do you have a customer service horror story? I'd love to hear it. Email me at the address below.

Here's to your success!

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