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Another Key to Thriving During Turbulent Times - Customer Service

Unfortunately, the economic and political climate is identical (if not worse) than last month, and there continues to be an immense amount of worrisome facts, figures and stories reported on the news every day. In order to not be focused on survival, which seems a tall challenge to many, and instead to focus on thriving in the current economic climate, it is imperative to focus on providing exceptional customer service and developing a customer service personality. It could be you and/or your company's unique differentiator - could there be a better time to stand out in the crowd?

Why this subject now? Because I've experienced a few overpowering examples of customer service recently. It was apparent that each example yielded significant results - happier customers, increased business, and increased profitability. What else could be more relevant to thriving in tough economic times? One example occurred a week ago when I went to Mimi's Café for lunch, as I try to go as often as feasible during the holidays since I enjoy their seasonal pumpkin pancakes. I used to go more frequently about three years ago; however, my circumstances changed, and I stopped going as frequently with the exception of a few times during the holiday season. Last week, as soon as I sat down at the counter, a server who had served me at least two to three years ago when I was a regular saw me and seemed overjoyed to see me. Luckily, I recognized her, although I am certain I wouldn't have recognized her after 3 years if I waited on hundreds of people a day (I don't remember anyone from my days as a Sizzler server long ago). She asked how I've been, remembered a few things about me (which is a great feat since I wasn't a talker), and provided ideas on how I could order to save money. As I left, I thought I should start to go to Mimi's again more frequently even during the non-seasonal timeframe. After all, who wouldn't want to be treated as royalty? This concept can be applied to your career / life or to your business. Either way, it will likely result in repeat business, new business (after all, I've told this story to several people), and better success overall. So, how do you create an exceptional customer service spirit and/or experience?

First, consider how you'd like to be treated and treat your customers, clients, suppliers, employees etc like that - simple yet profound. My Mimi's experience is a great example of this point.

Second, find out what your customers, suppliers, etc need and then provide it. Instead of thinking about making a sale, think about how you can provide value. For example, in my experience, most of the ultra successful salesmen do not hard sell. Instead, they ask questions and try to understand what the customer needs (even if the customer doesn't know what they need) and try to understand the priorities (cost, features, services etc). Then, they provide whatever service or product best fills the need (and priorities) - whether it results in a sale or not. The best salesmen will tell you if they are not the best fit or their product isn't the best fit for your need, and they will refer you to a better fit / solution. In my experience, although it doesn't result in an immediate sale, it typically results in ten-fold results down-the-line. And you've provided exceptional customer service.

Lastly, be consistent and reliable. As tempting as it might seem, do not overpromise. It is far more successful to provide realistic expectations, deliver on your promises consistently and strive for continuous improvement. For example, during these tough economic times, it is common to increase corporate focus on reducing inventory levels to more of a just-in-

time approach to increase cash flow. In order to accomplish this goal successfully, it is critical to use suppliers that deliver on-time and reliably so that your manufacturing lines won't be down waiting for materials and/or your customers won't suffer with late deliveries. As simple as it sounds, being consistent and reliable delivers customer service and bottom line results!

Lisa's Tips: Tips for the New Year

2008 has been a challenging year for most people and businesses, so here are a few tips to ensure 2009 is a success.

1. Consider last minute tax strategies - this is always a smart business and personal consideration, as there is often times a significant amount of potential savings in thinking ahead with taxes (after all, taxes and interest are typically the two largest expenses in your life). And it is never too early to start strategizing for 2009!
2. Keep up on the trends - don't focus too much on the inundation of negative news details; instead, focus on the high level trends and consider ways to be proactive, given the changing trends and circumstances.
3. Continuous improvement/ learning - this is always important but never as important as it is in the current economy. I credit my brother Greg with reminding me of this tip, as he signed up for three on-line classes starting in January to keep up-to-date with the latest programming and engineering techniques so that he can provide increased value.
4. Remember your positive attitude - as I said last month, a positive attitude is one of the keys to success in thriving during the current tough times.
5. People and teams - do not go it alone. Work with teams. Brainstorm ideas. Debate options. Help others/ provide value. In my experience, the most successful people and businesses are surrounded by people working together to create something far more successful than any one person could create on his/her own.

Recommended Reading

"[*Dangerous Business: the Risks of Globalization for America*](#)" by Pat Choate - it is a fascinating book that discusses the history, risks and impacts of globalization. It is especially interesting in light of our current economic crisis and unemployment rates; however, regardless of your thinking on globalization, it provides interesting insights and probes your thinking on these interwoven subjects.

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