

The new phenomenon of how to have a successful business has just been discovered

By Julie Vella, Director, Success Train

Customer service incorporating suggestive selling is the newest tool to enable businesses to succeed. It is being considered by varied industries that are engaging in activities to maintain their current customers and attract new ones.

But is it really new?

McDonald's have used this concept for years and made billions of dollars from a very simple phrase: "Would you like fries with that?"

Buying a business has many elements to consider and customer service is just one of these elements. The many daunting tasks involved with being in a small business take priority over your time and include:

- attracting, recruiting and retaining staff
- managing and training staff
- ordering stock and managing leakage
- ensure all staff comply to the business standards
- and let's not forget the BAS.



Retail is no longer a one off transaction; repeat purchases are the catalyst to survive. The process of attracting and retaining customers is much easier than most small retail businesses make it.

Benefits of good customer service

Good customer service should be part of any successful business' policies and procedures. The responsibility of good customer service lies with the entire business from the most senior managers through to every staff member.

Good customer service results in:

- increased transaction size
- increased gross profit
- enticing loyal consumers to frequent the store more often
- increased repeat visits
- improvement in store traffic flow.

Customer service and suggestive selling have been utilised by successful businesses for many years. The common element of each of these concepts is that they create loyalty and a long term commitment from customers.

Consider: What makes you make a decision to return to a business a second time?

Customer service is behaviour and includes treating the customer with respect, attention to detail and a willingness to please.

Having a good product will bring the customer to the business, but good customer service will make them come back, and tell others of their experience.

Efforts to encourage existing customers to purchase more or to drive traffic into the store can be wasted if the face to face contact or customer service levels are poor. Many new and existing customers can be lost through poor personal contact and you may never know of this dissatisfaction.

Impact of first impressions on good customer service

The first impression is critical to a customer feeling they want to return to your store. An impression can be made before the staff member has even spoken.

A positive first impression can be created by:

- staff being well groomed
- uniforms being kept clean
- smile and tone of voice
- posture, upright and ready to serve
- positive attitude
- being attentive, but not rushing the customer
- making the customer feel you are there to serve them, rather than you are trying to make a sale.

Consider: Can you determine if someone is interested in talking to you by the way they stand, or their facial expressions? Your customers can judge you and your staff the same way. Hunched over the counter not moving when customers come to the counter, could display you are not interested in them and don't want their business. Your attitude and passion will be evident when you are serving customers. Be mindful of attitude and how you affect others and the impact on the transaction.

Customer-centred versus self-centred

“You don't see things from my point of view”, or “put yourself in my shoes for a minute and see how it feels.” If you have ever been on the receiving end of one of these phrases, it may have been as a result of being self-centred.

The ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes and to be customer centred is a skill that will place you in a much better position than your competitors.

Being customer centred is very effective in displaying that the staff member is thinking of the customer rather than themselves. Situations that result in considering yourself may include:

- own targets or goals you are aiming to achieve
- past experience with a customer
- biases toward a type of customer i.e. age or gender.

Put yourself in your customer's shoes for one minute. Would they say the staff are customer centred or self-centred?

How is your customer acknowledged?

How do your staff presently acknowledge the customers when they walk into the store?

Do the staff make eye contact and greet a customer to show they are available to provide them with service if it's required?

Are the staff ready to drop what they are doing to acknowledge a customer?

Consider: How many times have you been a customer and made to wait while the attendant restocks shelves or continues cleaning or having a conversation with a colleague.

None of these activities are more important than acknowledging the customer.

Acknowledging a customer waiting to be served could be either verbal or non-verbal and may include:

- a smile or a nod
- 'I'll be with you in a minute'
- if known, acknowledge by name.

By acknowledging the customer, they will realise they have been seen and it will confirm for them the wait is worth it for the good customer service.

The power of suggestive selling

Suggestive selling is just that, suggesting a product, making your customers aware of your offers. Tempt your customers with suggestions of how to make their shopping experience more enjoyable and allow them to make up their mind to purchase the offer.

Suggestive selling needs to make the customer's shopping experience pleasant. When making a suggestion, limit it to one as if more than one is made, the customer may feel making a sale is the only thing important to the staff member. This is uncomfortable for both the customer and the staff member. Asking the customer 'have you seen our great new special today?' with a positive attitude will display you are enthusiastic about making the customer's experience the best it can be. Inform all customers about the offer of the month. Don't make assumptions or presume a customer would not be interested in your offer. By letting each of your customers know about this month's offer may not entice them to purchase this time, but will entice them to revisit at a later date to take up the offer. Customers like to be treated as individuals.

Consider: The last time you visited a travel agent, a hairdresser, a shoe shop or an electronic store, did they make any suggestions?

Customers buy many items on impulse, and suggestive selling brings the customer's attention to an offer.

The biggest obstacle to suggestive selling is the staff failing to ask. It may be a lack of confidence or fear of rejection that the staff doesn't practice suggestive selling with every transaction. Regular training and a clear focus on what the suggestion of that period is, will assist in eradicating these obstacles.

Increasing profit today!

Being aware, reading articles and researching customer service are all ways to improve your awareness of this critical element of a successful business. Making it happen is the next step.

What you can do if you are considering buying a business or are an existing franchisee is:

- revisit the customer service element of your franchisee's manual as soon as possible post the induction training
- assess what levels of customer service your business currently has, and then consider what your ideal level is, and work toward closing that gap
- ensure all staff members including managers, casual and permanents, offer or suggest at every transaction
- develop a customer service model of excellence you want your staff to adhere to. Place this at every point of purchase so that the staff member is reminded of the model.
- include regular customer training sessions into your team meetings. A round table discussion of 'what good customer service should look like in our business,' is a great way of engaging the staff and empowering them to take ownership of the process or model.

Good luck and happy customer serving.

Julie Vella is the Director and Principal Consultant of Success Train, specialising in sales training behaviour skills utilised to retain and attract customers and increase transaction size. The Success Train methodology is to train the store managers and franchisees to grow their own business. Julie has 30 years of sales experience, 20 of those years in the FMCG industry. For further information please visit the Success Train website www.successtrain.com.au