

MARKETING *Benchmarks*

8 pointers on building customer loyalty

Repeat customers buy more often than first-timers, spend more per transaction, cost less per sale, and say nicer things about your business. That's why computerized customer-relations programs are so hot these days. But it takes more than technology to keep customers happy — and many businesses fail to respect the fundamentals of loyalty-creation. Here are eight of them:

■ Deliver more than you promise.

Nothing makes a customer purr more than a supplier who adds value to every transaction by unexpectedly increasing its benefits.

A periodic letter program on emerging developments in your field — not another sales pitch — can keep your client up to date on news that his order proves concerns him. It's a highly affordable way to bond with him.

"A good plan executed today is better than a perfect plan executed next week."

— General George S. Patton, Jr

■ If you goof, admit it.

Customers respect intellectually honest suppliers. If you have disappointed a client, do not waffle. Admit your mistake, apologize for it, offer a remedy for it, and say exactly what you are doing to correct your error permanently.

■ Thank your customer for every order.

Many marketers do not express gratitude or appreciation to their customers after a sale. "They miss a significant loyalty-building opportunity," observes New York marketing consultant Al DiGuido.

Your mother was right. "Please" and

"Thank You" are the magic words in human relationships.

■ Know your customer — and show it.

Most companies still communicate with their customers in one-size-fits-all messages. They do themselves a disservice — because people want to be treated as individuals. That creates a major opportunity for businesses that collect data on each of their customers, then use it to individualize their promotions.

■ Choose your customer data wisely.

The time and work you spend in forging a customer database can generate a highly profitable return on your investment — especially if you use some imagination.

You know your customer's name and address. But you also know the date he first and most recently did business with you ... the value of his latest and all-time orders ... when he won his last promotion ... the dates of his wedding anniversary, and his kids' birthdays ... his alma mater ... his secretary's name ... many other facts that will generate opportunities for you to make a faster friend with him.

■ Ask your customer for the names of key associates.

Far better than you, your customer knows who pulls the strings in his business organization. If you ask him, he probably will be willing and able to pinpoint purchase influencers you did not know earlier.

■ Turn your happiest customers into salesmen for you.

Whenever a customer is genuinely happy with your products or services, do not be shy — ask him for a testimonial, or even a personal reference. If you put your request in the right way, your client will be flattered, which always helps.



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