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*By: Jan Burnett*

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## **About the Author**

Jan Burnett worked in various small and large businesses. She believes that one of the most important factors which the most successful businesses shared was that all of their staff had an awareness of the importance of customer satisfaction.

Jan says that rapidly changing technology, strong competition and reduced profit margins have made customer satisfaction more important than ever. She wrote her ebook to explain in plain language what she believes are the best methods for providing quality customer service in all areas of a business.

Jan said that many books about Customer Service provide tips for better Customer Service and some explain the latest theories and research into the process. Her book is based on her front-line experience and some solid research into the methods and strategies which are currently being used to enhance interaction with customers in all kinds of situations. She tells you what works and her view about why it does.

Jan has been using the Internet for a few years and includes a section dealing with the benefits of delivering some customer support through your web site. But, she says that there are some potential problems which everyone should also be aware of. Jan says, "With companies using more technology and reducing the number of experienced staff to cut costs and try to maintain profit levels, providing the best Customer Service you can is more vital than ever."

## **Why Customer Service is Important to You.**

Whatever size or type of business you own or work for, a key ingredient in its success is the quality of the customer service which is provided. Customer service involves all contact with people that are or have been customers of your business, and also everyone that approaches your business to enquire about the products or services which you offer.

Quality customer service is one of the main differences between the levels of success which businesses enjoy in any area of activity. Improving the quality of customer service which you provide usually costs very little and can have a strong, fairly quick impact on your bottom line. But, most people overlook its importance.

When they are looking for ways to improve the return they get, they focus on:

- \$ New or improved technology.
- \$ Discounts or contests.
- \$ More or different advertising.

Buying new equipment may be necessary where it can help you to compete more successfully with your competitors. But, there could be a significant time lag while you survey the different types of equipment available, buy it and have it installed. Then, there is the time required for someone to learn to use the equipment effectively.

Discounts and contests cost money, require staff or consultants to organize and monitor them so that they comply with legal restrictions and there is no hint of bias or other problems. Their effectiveness cannot be seen until some time after they have run, when you see whether they have caused a sustained increase in your customer base or if any rise in sales was just temporary for the duration of the promotion.

Changing or increasing your advertising involves a time lag while the new material is discussed and prepared. It will take time to have any effect.

Again, any improvement in your bottom line above the costs of the new advertising will take time to show up. Only the extra cost is certain.

But, anyone that takes even very small steps to improve the way that they and everyone in their business handles customer service will probably see some positive effects relatively quickly.

Most of the methods which I explain in this book will cost very little or nothing at all. They will not cause any significant disruption for anyone.

You will only get the best results if you practice these tips with a view to helping other people enjoy and improve their lives. If you use them in a manipulative way with just a focus on the money you can get, people will realize what your motivation is.

There are two types of people who are likely to succeed, whatever the economy does:

- One group are people who are already established and follow good advice.
- The other group are those who develop their ability to negotiate and promote – the people who provide good customer service. They will find their customers listen to them and tell others about them more readily.

They will always have to work hard but they will find their reputation improved along with their bottom line.

## **Consistent Responses to Customers**

There is probably no more important part of the procedures which are used by a company's staff than those involved with dealing with their customers.

But most people have not had any training in this area and have developed their own ways in response to whatever circumstances and events they experienced on the job.

That usually means that everybody in the business is doing things a little differently to the others.

Many businesses, especially sole traders and new start-ups, don't have the time or budget for formal training.

Without formal, written procedures, each new person has to learn from observing how other people in the business do things while also doing the work which they were hired to do.

They see a variety of approaches to standard tasks, and the other staff may have little time to fully answer any questions they ask.

This can lead to mistakes and poor outcomes from their dealings with customers.

This shows the value of working out the best way to deal with people that come to the business, from casual enquirers, serious prospects and also people with concerns or complaints.

Involve the staff in developing some notes for the use of all staff, especially new people, about how to approach and interact with visitors and people who contact them through phone and email etc.

Stress the importance of good organization when dealing with customers. This improves your ability to respond quickly to new and old clients.

A friend said that many people have no time to become organized because they are so disorganized.



First contact with a new customer may be through any member of the staff, so everyone should be involved. If that first contact is irritating or unpleasant, that may be a potential lifetime customer lost forever.

This can have a long-term effect on your cashflow and opportunities for the business to grow.

Consistent quality customer service is that important.

When people realize the importance of consistently treating customers well, they start to turn their informal methods into documented systems. That makes it easier to ensure all customers are treated equally well and professionally when they contact the business.

This helps all employees too.

Written procedures which are based on proven methods are much easier for new employees to fit in and give the best value to the customers and support to more experienced staff.

When they have a framework to work within, everyone knows the rules and procedures and the limits of their authority. They can concentrate on doing their job to the best effect. There are likely to be fewer mistakes and any which occur are more easily dealt with.

Writing down the procedures helps you to focus on each step.

Involving all staff in this procedure may lead to suggestions from their individual experience of ways to improve procedures which may not be recorded where there is no formal system.

Using written procedures makes it easier to identify problems such as duplication of effort and procedural bottlenecks which get in the way of prompt and profitable interaction with your customers.

And, of course, that is the part of your work which has the biggest potential for increased profitability.

## Encouraging Staff Commitment

The quality and effectiveness of your customer service can only be as good as the commitment of those that provide it in your business. It is important that all of your staff realize that achieving customer



satisfaction is part of everyone's job description. Train and encourage all of your staff to consider the customer when deciding what action to take on any matter.

### ***"I don't need Customer Service Training!"***

Have you heard someone say, "I don't need Customer Service training because I am a manager, store supervisor or technician, not a sales person or receptionist!"

Most companies are starting to realize the reality is that their company's customers might make contact with almost any of the people in their organization do at some point.

If someone calls your company to ask whether you can supply a certain product or complete a certain task to a deadline, they may talk to your store supervisor or a machine operator.

Those contacts are as important for the overall impression the customer gets of your organization as the usual interaction with sales people and office staff.

Some technicians can have poor customer service skills but, if they can be encouraged to work on that area, they can become valuable ambassadors for their company. They meet your customers when they have problems with your products or are thinking about spending more on upgrading them.

A colleague of mine once suggested that our salespeople are like doctors who fix people's problems and help them to live better. I think that his comparison is a little weak but it is definitely worthwhile for the technical staff to focus on fixing your clients' concerns or problems and learning how to answer their questions in simple non-technical language.

That can also help the technicians to broaden their own employment prospects.

## Dealing with Dissatisfied Customers

No-one likes to be a target or to have their integrity or the products and services which they supply



described in less than glowing terms. No one or any business gets everything right every time, so it is inevitable that we will have to deal with some dis-satisfied clients.

When you meet this situation, it is important to keep in mind that you are not the target of the complaint.

The customer is unhappy because they did not get the results they wanted from the use of our product. You are just the person they can demonstrate their unhappiness to.

As long as we did not overstate or mislead about the benefits of our product, we are personally in the clear.

It is also important to listen to the customer's views. I have found that complaints can highlight unseen problems in the information about your products or services is presented to your customers.

Your promotional material may give the impression that your products will enable them to get results which cannot be reasonably expected. Or, some of your salespeople may be making unrealistic claims.

Anything like this can be easy to fix, but you may not even be aware there is a problem until someone complains.

That focus should move us from a defensive frame of mind to focus much better on the best way to

Whatever the reason for their unhappiness about the transaction, we want to help this customer to have a lasting good impression of our businesses and our products. We are aware that it is much more cost effective to sell to customers that have dealt with this before than it is to be always trying to replace people that buy once and never return.

You probably have also heard that an unhappy customer will probably tell at least seven of their friends or business associates. But, few happy customers actually bother to broadcast the good news like that.

You may think that the potential loss of seven or eight customers is not that bad although you don't like the idea of losing any.

But, losing even one customer and leaving them with a poor impression of the business, its products and the way it deals with concerns that customers may have is likely to have long-lasting effects on the company's public image. That will also affect the impression some people have of the people that represent the business.

It is also important to remember that each of those people that your ex-customer gave their opinion of your business and your products will probably also each tell a few people themselves. People love to pass on bad news, even if it isn't always true.

When you meet (or get a phone call from) an unhappy customer, these suggestions can help:

- Maintain a pleasant and professional attitude, however hard that may be at times.
- Always use their name and title (Ms. Jordan) until they tell you otherwise.
- Smile unless to do so would be inappropriate.
- Maintain eye contact when face to face.
- Fixing their problem should be your entire focus for whatever time it takes.
- Never use the tired old phrase, "What is the problem?" You don't want them focusing on problems. Say something like, "I want to find an outcome

which you are happy with." The words "you" and "happy" give the right message to the customer. Use "I" as little as possible.

- Give the customer your full attention.
- Let them tell their story in full. Many people make the mistake of cutting off their account of the problem. But, letting them give the details which they feel are important can help to improve their view of you and your business.



Ask what the customer wants to be done so they believe that their concern is fully dealt with. Some demand may be far in excess of what can be reasonable but, many times, you will find that the customer is asking for acknowledgement of their

view and a resolution which is fair and reasonable.

- Don't say, "I know how you feel." Better to use something like, "I understand how you would feel like that in that situation". You can understand the reason for the reaction but you probably haven't been through exactly the same situation.
- When they pause, repeat the most important parts of the information back to them in your own words so that your customer is comfortable that you are listening and understanding what he is concerned about.
- Show that you are interested in what they are saying.
- Before you suggest a solution, ask them, "What could we do that would make this situation better for you?"
- Fix the problem or find out who can and contact them.

- If the client will have to talk to someone else about the matter, go with them to the other person and pass on the relevant details in the hearing of the client so that they know you understand the problem.
- When you have worked out what you believe is the best resolution, give them the details and ask them if that will be okay with them.
- When you have finished your discussion about the problem and, hopefully, reached a mutually agreeable resolution, thank them for telling you about the problem so that you had the chance to make things right and could also assure that no other client would encounter that problem in the future.

Every business needs to have a system which will:

- Get full details from the customer.
- Specify what the frontline staff can do to fix some problems promptly without referral to management.
- Ensure the relevant person keeps the customer informed about the progress on their problem or question.
- Record the details of action taken.
- Ensure there is follow-up after the problem has been dealt with to check that the customer is satisfied or, at least, that everything possible has been done to get a good outcome for them.

Surveys have consistently reported that someone that complains and has their problem dealt with promptly and to their satisfaction will often become a long-term loyal customer and even refer other people to your business.

That is because there is a widespread belief that many companies are not interested in keeping their customers happy after the check clears.

Because we treat all the people who contact our business with respect and focus on a fair outcome for them as well as ourselves, we are likely to stand out from our competition.

But, our focus on quality customer service can also help to improve the view which the general public holds of people in our area of activity.

## Encourage Client Feedback

Have you noticed that many businesses these days actively encourage feedback from their customers and even from casual inquirers?

For some, it is just the latest idea from their marketing department. But, most do it in a genuine attempt to improve customer satisfaction with their products and customer service.



That feedback, both good and bad, can be a great help for improving your relationship with your customers. The state of that relationship has a direct impact on your bottom line. The most common way of gathering feedback is to supply a card on which the client can put their comments or just tick their choices in some multi-choice questions. These have some value but there are probably more efficient and productive methods available.

Here are some suggestions to get the best results from this method:

- Ask open questions instead of the yes/no type which may limit the value of the feedback which you receive.
- Provide enough space for meaningful comments.
- Leave some space for comments about anything which may be important to the client but not specified by you on the card.
- Ask for their name and minimal contact details, such as an e-mail address.
- Explain clearly where you want them to put or deliver the card.
- Always use a reply paid card if you want it posted back to you.



- Ask them if they want you to acknowledge getting their feedback. Make sure that someone sends that acknowledgment by mail or e-mail as soon as possible after their card is received.

Some businesses have the response cards collected by the staff that is providing the service which the customers are commenting on.

That can create the impression that any cards with negative comments might not get to the person who will evaluate the feedback. It can also cause the customers to feel uncomfortable for the rest of the time they are in contact with the staff on that occasion.

It's better to have the cards posted directly back to the manager or owner.

### **Dealing with Negative Feedback**

Never take any comments, however critical, personally.

Sometimes, the customer may build a minor irritation into a major complaint.

They may be complaining because they have had a bad day and be under stress from things not connected with your business or products.

It is still important to treat them and their view with respect.

You have asked for feedback about your products and services and that's what both you and the client should be focused on.

Don't become defensive or argue with the customer. Even if you win the point, you will lose the customer and create bad word-of-mouth about your business.

The focus should always be on achieving customer satisfaction and repeat business. Leave the scoring of points to the sports field.

## **Meeting Customer Expectations**

We all know what we want from any sort of transaction but we can sometimes not realize that a prospective customer has similar high expectations for the money which they pay to us.

Those expectations must be met as much as possible.

To do that, we must listen carefully to what the client says and repeat the significant information back to them so that we are clear about what they require.

Use your eyes and your ears. Many times, I have caught significant indications of those features and benefits which are most important to them from someone's body language and their voice.

It is common to make assumptions based on our experience with other clients and in other situations which may be far off the mark when applied to a particular client's needs or expectations.

If your focus is not in line with their desires and expectations, you could miss out on their business. Or, you may sell them something that cannot meet their most important requirements.

Remember, "people don't want to buy a drill, they want a hole." Focus on their needs more than your wonderful product.

### ***Be Selective***

If you provide services of some kind, you should focus on those areas where you are strongest. Have you seen a sign which says, "We are Specialists in EVERYTHING!" That really doesn't make sense, does it?

Many people cause themselves great stress and damage their business reputation by grabbing every job they can.

If they don't have the specific skills in a particular section of their trade to do a quality job fast enough to be profitable for them, it's better to refuse the work.

But, there may be a pressing need to bring extra money into their business which makes them willing to take on jobs which they are less qualified to handle or to quote a lower price just to get the work. They may produce a lower quality job than the client expects. Even if their customer does not demand a refund or some kind of compensation for the low quality produced, they will spread the word about their bad experience and reduce the pool of potential future customers for that business.

When someone cuts too much off the price which they quote because they are desperate for more income in that period, they set up problems for themselves and their customers.

They will have to put more time into that job to produce work to the expected standard. That will also impact on the amount of other work which they can produce to their usual standard.

The damage from this will cost the service provider more than he realizes.

They will get a lower return for the amount of time and effort which they put in.

If you do tell a prospective customer that you are unable to do the particular work they want, try to recommend someone that does specialize in that area.

When you focus on the work which you do best, you will find that other people in your industry will be very willing to recommend you for work which they are unable to do because they know that the results which you produce will be of a standard which will reflect well on them for having made the recommendation.

## What Turns Customers Off

Almost everyone I know has their own horror story about being turned off from a possible purchase when the only staff they could find had little interest in their needs, or they were unable to find anyone at all to take their money! The stories have become more common as businesses have embraced technology and reduced staff as a way to contain costs and try to maintain profits.

One reason that some staff display a "don't care" attitude is because the management don't support them with training or give them even verbal recognition when they achieve better than expected results. Nobody should be in a job where they contact the public unless they have got at least some basic guidelines about how to treat people well.

Giving staff the authority to settle small problems before they escalate to demands for refunds or other unwelcome actions can build their confidence and enthusiasm, while also impressing the customers because of the time and frustration which result when we have asked for a problem to be resolved at other firms.

People that visit your business expect to be able to discuss their needs, get fair advice about alternative options, have their questions answered and get above average service when they buy.

**Just browsing:** There are many businesses which obviously only focus on people that are ready to buy and give people that are shopping around for the best deal less attention.



Only some of these people are totally focused on price, but everyone is entitled to do their due diligence and get the best deal they can for their money. There are benefits to making them all feel welcome and dealing with their questions in a friendly professional manner. That can create a lasting impression which could result in future purchases and good word of mouth.

**Little minds:** One turn-off which I have experienced is when some male sales people treat me as if I won't be able to understand the finer points of a computer or car that they want to sell me because I am a female!

This is gender bias, but the display of any kind of bias is likely to damage the potential for a lasting business relationship.

**Give them recognition:** Regular customers should be recognized when they return or call about possible further purchases. It isn't hard for almost anyone to remember people's names and details. It can pay dividends both personally and professionally.

## What to Do to Keep Customers



Maintain the personal touch in all your dealings with customers. People appreciate someone that treats them as a person deserving respect rather than just a cash cow. They like to feel they are dealing with a real person rather than a bean-counting hype merchant whose interest in them is always linked to their dollar value to the business.

It's a good idea to remember their names and use them whenever possible. It's not that hard. Keep a record of any personal information such as birthdays which they give you but, of course, never share any information about them to anyone.

Do whatever you do better than your competition.

Reliability is essential. Reliable advice which is easy to understand is priceless. People are turned off from buying a product because they don't understand the benefits to them and many find the explanations which merchants offer confusing, too technical or not focussed on their needs.

Many people send their best customers a Christmas card. Most have the sense to write a message in it by hand. But, try to be original. If you sold someone their home, get a picture of their home, enlarge it and put it on a calendar for next year.

The most important quality you can develop is reliability. Be on time for appointments, when delivering orders and following up complaints. A complaint that is handled fairly can impress the person so much that they become a loyal customer. Many people have had a hard time when trying to get a problem resolved, so those who do the right thing stick in our memories.



All staff has a stake in making the customers' visit to your business memorable for all the right reasons. A businessman once gave his receptionist a desk plaque with "Director of First Impressions" on it.

This struck a chord with many other people and similar plaques appeared in businesses around the world. But, the truth is that the first staff member that a potential customer meets has that role. They have to realize the importance of the impression that they give that person will have a lasting effect on the reputation and profitability of the whole business.

And, any staff member that doesn't treat a customer well is likely to be the one that they talk about to their friends, telling them to stay away from that business. Many people find it difficult to reveal that they don't know everything about the business they are in. So, if a customer asks them a question which they don't know the right answer for, some will just guess, instead of asking someone else to ensure the customer gets the right answer.

My first boss told me, "There is no problem with not being able to answer a customer's question unless you can't give the right answer to the second person that asks you."

## **Develop Your Listening Skills**

Good listening skills will make good customer service much easier. Everyone believes they are great listeners but many people have grown up with some bad habits which are likely to have a negative effect on the people they are listening to. Take in what your eyes tell you about the customer and their needs as well as what you hear. Body language and Neuro

Linguistic Programming can help you to develop rapport with people but they both take considerable practise before you can hope to achieve good results.

- Avoid interruptions while talking to a customer.
- Don't let your eyes wander around the room while they are talking.
- Don't fiddle with your pen, clothing or anything else. It is disrespectful if they're speaking and indicates a lack of attention if you do it while you're talking to them.
- Don't judge a book by its cover or the customer just by their clothes, car or manner.

### ***Treat the Children Well***

I've noticed that some businesses are not interested in or equipped for customers with children. They may provide the occasional floating balloon during special promotions but generally give the impression that the kids should stay in the car park. However, it's good business to treat the children as special because that is what their parents believe. Children are likely to become quickly bored and often irritable when they are in shops which have nothing to interest them. Anyone that makes some kind of special effort to engage or amuse them is likely to impress the parents too.

Never offer any food item to a child directly without checking with the parents first. Many children (and adults) have some kind of intolerance to various substances and it's better to be considerate.



## **Tweak Your Way to Success**

Most races are won by very small margins. But, of course, the rewards for the winner are much greater than those which the second-place getter receives. In business, second place may get you very little or nothing at all.

If you think about it, you can probably think of changes that you could adopt which would make it easier for your customers to deal with you.

It might be worth writing down any comments which you get where people have even minor difficulties with your procedures, the layout of your premises or selection of stock.

### ***Test Shopper***

You might ask a reliable friend, who is unknown to the people in your business, to phone as a potential customer with one or two questions that you provide to them. Then, they can let you know about anything which they think could be improved.

This is not a suggestion to start spying on your staff. Putting your staff off-side is the quickest way to ruin your whole improvement campaign. The



idea is to get a fresh, unbiased view of how your business is dealing with people with a view to improving the experience for everybody involved.

Larger businesses are doing this all the time, using services which send their employees to the business as customers who actually buy products and sometimes return them so that all aspects of the

customer service can be checked and reported on. You can do the same sort of thing to check the user friendliness when a customer finds your organization.

Some of the automated systems which have been rolled out over the last few years are particularly frustrating to many people I know. There are systems where a recorded voice leads you through a menu of choices; "for sales, press button 1" and so on. A brief menu where the choices are easy to understand is not too bad.

But, after you navigate through one menu on some of these systems, you are presented with another menu. I suspect that many callers will probably give up at this point unless their need is extremely urgent. And, if it is, they shortly don't want to have to navigate through multiple menus.

I recognize that these systems are intended to reduce the number of staff needed to respond to calls by routing the callers to the appropriate section speedily and without human intervention. They will be no problem for people that are used to handling modern technology but there are still a lot of people who find them difficult and frustrating.

You should think about whether this technology will make it easier for your customers to get prompt service when they phone your business.

## Communication

We have been communicating all our lives and many people think that they are naturally very good at it. But, it is a natural ability which we can all improve on. Many people don't realize that they may have developed some bad habits in the way which they communicate that work against the effectiveness of their messages.

### *Tips for Good Communication*

**Use their title:** Unless you know the customer on a personal basis, it's a good general rule to use their title (Mr., Mrs., Ms. or Dr. etc.,) when you first meet them.

- They will let you know if they want you to call them by their first name.
- Be careful not to abbreviate their first name unless they ask you to. If someone tells you that their name is Jonathon, that's what you should call them; not John, Jack or Johnny!
- Men should always treat women like they would want their partner or sister to be treated in a similar situation.
- The basic rule for business contacts is to always treat the potential customer with great respect and let them adjust the limits if they want to.



## Telephone

I've put the telephone first because it is a method of communication which almost all of us have been using right through our lives. But it is a sad fact that misuse of the telephone is very common. Very few people know how to use it properly in a business situation.

These tips will help you to make a good impression on your customers and people you want as customers.

- Always use Mr., Ms. or other titles when dealing with people who are potential customers.
- Think carefully about how you will introduce yourself when they answer the phone. That introduction can set the tone for the whole conversation.
- It is equally important to work out a good way to finish each call. I suggest that you say something like, "Thank you for talking with me, Mr. Jones." The most important parts of that statement are the "Thank you" and the use of their name. Both will have a positive effect.
- Whether you are making or receiving a call, always smile when you pick up the phone. Yes, it really does help.

### ***Making calls.***

- Ensure as far as possible that there are no distracting background noises or other distractions during these calls.
- Don't slouch when you are talking. That compresses your chest and affects your voice. It doesn't help your circulation either.
- Make sure that you have all the information you need before making your call.
- Many people cannot think of what to say when they find that the person they want to talk to is unavailable.
- Have your "please call me back" message ready before you call. Think about and then write down the message you will leave on their answering machine, or with their assistant, if they are not available. Preparing it in

advance of the call ensures that you will cover all the important points. It will also help to ensure you leave a clear, short message that is likely to get a positive response.

- Put any calls which you feel may be difficult at the top of your to-call list – delaying them will only increase any discomfort you feel when you actually make them. You will usually find that the customer appreciates a prompt response and your professional attitude.
- You should avoid interruptions from visitors or other phone calls while you are talking with a customer. But, if you hear another phone starts to ring in their office, always ask them if they would like you to hold so they can attend to the other call. That shows consideration on your part and also ensures that the phone will soon be dealt with.
- Before you make a call, take a few calming breaths.

### ***Receiving calls.***

- Ensure that you have everything you need to take a message for yourself or another person before you answer the call.
- Some people believe that answering a phone on the first or second ring is a sign of professionalism. But, I suggest that you answer on the third or fourth ring. Many callers don't start thinking about what they are going to say until they actually pick up the phone to call.
- "Hello?" is not a suitable greeting for a business caller. Always give your name, organization and, if it is relevant, your title or department.
- If you are answering someone else's phone while they are away from the area, the best response is to say something like, "Mary Smith's office, this is Mark Jones speaking." It can be confusing for the visitor if someone answers Mary's phone with a simple, "Hello" or just give your name. Some people may even just hang up without checking whether they called correct number if they hear a voice which they don't recognize.
- If you have to transfer the caller to another person, dial their number. When the other staff member answers, say something like, "Mr. Dawson, I

am transferring you to Andrew Smith who will be able to help you with your problem with the cubby house which we sent to you on Tuesday last week. Andrew, this is Mr. Dawson."

- If you take a message, write it down and then read it back to the caller to ensure that you have clearly stated what they said.
- If you are not sure of the spelling of someone's name or any other information, ask for them to spell it or give more detail.
- No-one will be offended when someone takes some effort to get their name and message correct.
- If you say that you will call someone back, call them as close to the agreed time that you can - even if you have to tell them that you have not yet got the answer to their enquiry.

## Letters and Postcards

In this digital age, the rare hand-written letter, or even a postcard, can have a surprising impact on someone as long as it is not just another way of trying to sell them something. This has been the secret weapon of many top sales people for years. They write to their clients a few days after they've concluded the sale of a major item. People do appreciate the thoughtfulness but it also help to ease the possible effect of a commercial reality called "buyer remorse".

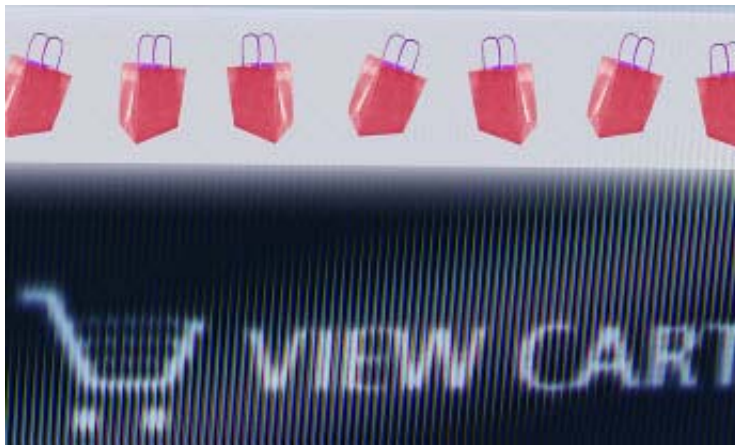
Buyer remorse is when someone has bought something which is expensive in their terms such as a car, house or some luxury item. A few days after the excitement of possessing the new item starts to lose its lustre as they look at the state of their finances, the size and length of their commitment and they review the other options which were almost as good. They start to think about whether they did the right thing after all. Then, your personal note arrives. It helps to gently reinforce the great impression which they got of you and your business. It shows you are not just an adding machine with a good smile.

But, it's not just as after-sales follow-ups where the personal note can have a positive impact. Many successful professionals also send their major clients a note for their birthday, when read or hear that their client got an award or other public recognition or when they see something which might help them with their business (but has no financial angle for the sales person).

This attention to detail helps keep them in their customers' thoughts. Think about where you might send a note to a customer? Then, do it. But, put some thought into what you say so that it focuses on them and does not display any commercial tinge.

## Benefits of a Customer Focused Web Site

Almost every business can benefit from having a website. Even a small site can be a fairly simple and cost-effective means of promoting your business and services or products. Your site, provided it is professional in appearance and easy to use, can be a great help to improve communication with current customers as well as drawing potential new customers to you. It can also lead to connections with new sources of relevant products which you may not have learned about if they had not found you on the Internet.



Your own web site allows you to show your premises and products or projects that you have successfully completed in full color for pennies. You can also have changes made very quickly at minimal cost and

inconvenience. This is very much cheaper than other forms of promotion and is working for you 24 hours of every day of the year. But, having your business visible on the Internet can present challenges as well as the obvious opportunities.

Unfortunately, there is a common view that the Internet is as lawless as the American Wild West used to be. Media reports of sites concealing viruses and other malware in their offerings, stealing personal information and not delivering items which they sell make people very wary about buying anything from Internet businesses.

If you have a web site, especially one that offers products or services, you need to be constantly wary about the possibility of attacks on your web site (both its appearance and its security) and the misuse of your content by unscrupulous people on their own web sites. I've heard of several people whose websites have been copied and used by others!



You also need to ensure that your web site presents a professional appearance that will reassure web visitors that you are a reliable business. Your web site, however successful, cannot replace your other methods of promotion because many potential clients will prefer to deal with you face to face.

It's important for you to check that everything you put on your website is of a quality that reflects well on your business as a whole. Make sure that the tone of documents, displays and all other material on your website is in harmony and of at least a similar standard with all of the material which you provide at your business premises.

## Customer Service on the Internet

The Internet can be a great way to provide support to customers at low cost. You can encourage people to contact your bricks and mortar business by giving them easy access detailed information about your products and services with photos and even videos on your web site to. That can include advice and downloadable manuals for any of your products which they have bought or are interested in.

The benefits to you can be great. As well as reinforcing your customers' belief that they chose wisely when selecting your products or services, you are also advertising your business to a potentially unlimited World-wide market. But, you can also focus the information on your web site to the people in your local area. This can draw people to your store or office that would not call you by phone or come in to your premises to get information but are happy to visit your web site anonymously.

### *Documentation*

There are legal requirements in most countries which must be observed by businesses that operate on the Internet to attract and supply that country's residents. Businesses, even very small ones, should have a carefully drafted **Privacy Policy**, **Disclaimer** and **Terms of Use** in place on their website. Put links to these documents at the bottom of every page of the site.

It is obviously sensible to comply. An added advantage is that it helps to reassure people that visit your site about your business. You should consult your legal advisor and, possibly, any trade associations which you belong to about current requirements as well as checking on the web sites of the relevant government agencies.

The **Privacy Policy** spells out:

- What information, if any, that you collect about your customers.
- How you use that information.

- Whether or not you share the information with other people or businesses and under what circumstances.
- How people may find out what information you have about them.
- How they may get that information corrected or removed.

Businesses that may offer services or products which interest children have special responsibilities which may be covered by laws in your jurisdiction. The Privacy Policy must include both online and off-line contact information.

The **Terms of Use** tells visitors what use of the material on the web site is allowed.

You should spell out:

- Who holds the copyright of material on the website
- Whether visitors may copy, redistribute or publish any of it on another website or in other ways.

The **Disclaimer** clarifies any limits or exclusions which apply to offers and other information on your web site. It should be displayed in the same size and font as other information. Using fine print is likely to make for problems with both visitors to your site and regulators.

## **Make it Easy to Navigate Your Web Site**

When you get people to your website, you must make it easy for them to find what they are looking for.

A general rule is that your visitors should be able to get to the page which has the information they need with no more than three clicks.

Another irritation for visitors to web sites is when it is difficult for them to know exactly where they are in relation to other parts of your site.

You should provide links on each page to the most important areas of your site.

You should carefully check each page of your web site.

Ensure that you have not put anything on the web site which might distract or confuse your visitors.

Keep everything simple. Make sure that you identify your business clearly.

Put the most important information for your customers on the top section of each page. Remember that you probably have only about seven seconds to engage the interest of a visitor before they will click away to another web site.

Follow the traditional newspaper method. Give the visitor the basic information that will keep them on your web site in the first paragraph or two.

Don't try to appeal to people with different interests on the same page. If you have different kinds of products, link to special areas of your website where you can go into detail about each one.

Have just one main "call to action" on each page. If you have an email newsletter, don't put the subscription form on the same page where you ask them to buy something from your online store. If they subscribe to your newsletter and end up on another page, they may not bother to come back to your product offer.

## **Connecting with Customers from Your Web Site**

The enthusiastic adoption of the Internet by businesses of all sizes has created a huge market for programs and services which can help them to support their customers from their web site. The variety, quality and scope of these programs and services are rapidly increasing. The most common methods for communicating with your customers from your web site are

- Email
- Feedback forms
- Live chat
- Forums
- Frequently Asked Questions pages and other support information
- Tutorials in various forms

### **Email**

E-mail has many benefits for both small and large companies. The cost of e-mail is much lower than regular post and it is one of the fastest way is to get a written response from almost anywhere in the world to any urgent question that you may have. Many companies are using e-mail for a significant part of their communication with customers and suppliers. The productivity gains and reduction in costs can have a noticeable impact on your business's bottom line.

You need to ensure that your e-mails are as clearly worded and accurate as your formal business letters, though they may be less formal in their style. You can harvest the questions from the letters to use in your F.A.Q. pages and also to check if there are any recurring problems which may need attention.

Remember that anyone who sends an email with your company's name on it is representing the company. Make sure that all staff is aware of the responsibility they have to give good advice and make a good impression.

## Feedback forms

These forms are an old but still popular way to get feedback and questions from your customers. Most are just simple forms which accept a message similar to what the customer might have emailed to you. But, some are more detailed with check boxes or drop-down lists which the customer can select one or more items from.

It is important to get people to test the forms so that any possible problems can be eliminated before your customers are asked to use them.

Whoever tests them should look at them from the view of a person with limited or no knowledge of the company and its products.

People from within the company may tend to assume some questions or actions are clear only because of their specialized knowledge. These same questions may be a big problem for visitors to your web site who do not have that background information.

## Live Chat

This very popular facility lets the visitor to your web site contact a representative for a text-based conversation about their needs or concerns. This sort of program is widely used by large companies but there are even programs available which can be installed and operated by individuals with just one web site. The only drawback which I have seen with these programs is that many people are not good typists. The time to get the information from the visitor and their response to the suggestions of the operator can be longer than you may expect.



This can be very frustrating to your visitor, but skilled and enthusiastic operators can ensure that the visitor is given the time and any assistance they need, so that this becomes a feature of your customer service system.

You should review the answers which the operators use. If they were prepared by technical staff, they will probably be technically correct but may be fairly dull in their wording.



Ensure that your operators get enough breaks to maintain their enthusiasm and attention to detail.

Some may have to handle three or more chats at the same time.

With the programs I have used, each discussion can be copied and supplied to the visitor for their reference and, of course, that same file can be invaluable to your business for building an ever-growing file of stock answers to common questions.

Reviewing the conversations can also help you to spot any recurring problems and concerns which might develop.

### ***Frequently Asked Questions Pages***

These pages are compiled from technical information provided by suppliers of the products you sell and the questions you and your staff have been getting from customers. That may include questions from your store and from the questions and concerns in emails and the live chat system on your web site.

Some businesses set up these pages and believe they don't need to do anything else.

But, it is important that you review the answers to each question to ensure that they are clear, up-to-date and accurate.

Even with your best intention, the visitor may not be able to find the information which they need because of the way it is arranged or because they don't know how to navigate their way to the answer for their question.

Always provide an email link or an online form which sends a message to you or your technical support section.

You must ensure that these enquiries are answered promptly so that you can encourage visitors to get a very positive impression of your service.

Delay in response or no response at all could seriously affect the value of your investment in staff and technology.

You also need to continue to evaluate new systems as they appear or to find reliable sources of information about them.

## **Forums**

These are membership-based chat rooms which are usually used by web-based businesses whose customers are mostly familiar with using the Internet. A forum is an area on your web site which people that use your products must sign up to get access to.

The forum software program lets you set up areas within the Forum for discussion about different topics related to your products, services and your business generally.

You might have areas set up which focus on:

- Announcements of updates and other news about your business and products
- Answers to client's questions about how to best use each of your products
- Feedback, both good and bad, from users of your products.
- Requests for new features
- Customer stories about how they used your products. This area can produce great testimonials from users. But, you must make sure to



contact the person submitting the favorable report, confirm that they actually used the product and then get their permission in writing to use what they wrote for your promotions.

- Your customer's own methods and short-cuts for using your products. Here, you can discover things which can enhance the value of your products without costing you a cent! Of course, you do need to test any claim thoroughly and also contact the person providing the information before using it.

The drawback to Forums is that they need to be moderated by your staff or someone that you have confidence in. Spam is one problem, including the posting of links to illegal, dangerous or other sites which may upset your clients who use the Forum.

Some people will also try to start arguments with other users which can become very fiery and divisive. Or, they might post negative claims about your products or services. Keeping these problems to a minimum requires constant attention and prompt action.

But, building a well-regarded forum with a growing group of satisfied customers who help each other can be very rewarding for the reputation of your business and your own profile.

## **Tutorials**

Your web site can be a great way to get information about new and improved ways to use your products to users at very low cost. You avoid printing charges (your customers will probably be happy to download the information to their computers and print it on their own printers with their ink!).

You can quickly update the information you provide on your web site when there are changes to the product with no cost except for the time of the person that prepares the changes.

Compare that to the cost of reprinting a brochure or manual!

Another advantage is that you can use color extensively and as many pictures as you need or want to.

This increases eye-appeal without extra cost.

But, you must make sure that the pictures are not so large that your visitors who are using older computer systems may find that your web pages take too long to load onto their computer screens.

You can provide the information in printable form and also as videos.

## **Conferences and Demonstrations**

You can produce at low to medium cost online demonstrations and discussions which you can invite hundreds of your customers to attend without the cost of travelling to a special venue and accommodation or much disruption to their regular schedule. These services are constantly evolving and costs, generally, are dropping as more companies compete in this area.

You could prepare a demonstration and sign up with an online provider. Then, you can invite your customers to attend the virtual conference by telephone while watching your demonstration on their computer or they can use their computer with a headset and software provided by the service you signed up with to do everything over the Internet.

Depending on the service you use, you can probably get a recording of the audio or the audio and video presentation as well as details of everyone that attended, when they joined the group and when they left.

You can then provide the recording to your customers or just use it for your internal training.

Although this type of service is fairly easy to use, I would never attempt to involve my customers or suppliers without having attended at least a couple of presentations by other people and doing at least one "dry run" where only colleagues were involved.

You could even set up this type of conference for your staff and maybe even involve your suppliers in other locations interstate and overseas. That could deliver great benefits without the high cost of bringing the various people together in a particular country.

When arranging an online conference, the problem which is often raised is the different time zones which various people may live in.

There is no easy answer. But, if you are presenting it with a view to increasing your sales to people in other time zones, you may just have to sacrifice some sleep.

## **Customer Service in the Future**

There will continue to be rapid improvements in technology. New ways of interacting in personal and business activities will appear on the Internet as the power of home and business computer systems increase and the increased volume of sales bring prices down.

That means that you will need to watch for significant improvements in technology which could put you at a significant disadvantage if you stay with your current equipment and procedures.

Don't be too quick to jump on a new technology. Get independent verification that the cost of getting the new equipment installed and operational as well as re-training staff will provide sufficient benefits to be worthwhile.

The basics will remain.

People are drawn to those who show an interest in them. If you are only interested in the money, good luck. If you learn to provide good products or services and focus on the needs of your customers, you have a good chance of succeeding in whatever field you choose and the money will follow.

Don't let new fads tempt you to ditch procedures which are already working well for you and your staff.

## **Improving Customer Satisfaction is Simple**

Providing better customer service is simple, but it is not always easy to do the best thing when you are in a difficult unexpected situation.

If you start using some of the suggestions in my ebook today, you will be better prepared for the greater challenges of a tighter economy and more competition which we can all expect in the future.

"Keep it Simple" is one of the best pieces of advice I was ever given. I've tried to follow that with my book.

You may have heard some of the suggestions before or think that some are very simple.

They can still be extremely valuable when you take action on them in your business.

There is nothing here which involves great cost, but they can contribute to a positive effect on your bottom line in a fairly short time.

Each business is different but the basic principles of customer service are the same, whatever field you are involved in.

Focus on what your customer wants, not how wonderful your product or service is.

Learn from your mistakes the first time. The cost of repeating the same mistake can increase sharply.

Better customer service will enhance the appeal to your customers of every part of your business at minimal cost.

I wish you Good luck and greater success than you can presently dream of.

Jan Burnett

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