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# Customers For Life!

by JOHN BOE

The most successful companies place great value on developing lifetime relationships with their customers. In today's competitive marketplace, they're aware that their customers are aggressively prospected and their loyalty cannot be taken for granted. Customer-focused companies recognize that relationship building and follow-on service are critical components for promoting both customer retention and revenue growth.

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## Build a Relationship

Today we have access to innovative tools such as the Internet, cell phones, faxes and voice mail, all designed to enhance our ability to communicate. Nevertheless, even with all of these technological tools at our disposal, the alarming number of dissatisfied customers, lost sales and failed relationships all reflect the fact that none of us are as effective at communicating as we would like to believe.

Temperament understanding helps to foster effective communication. Research in the field of human psychology indicates people are born into one of four primary behavioral styles: aggressive, expressive, passive or analytical. Each of these four temperament styles requires a unique approach and communication strategy. For example, if you are working with the impatient, aggressive style, they want a quick fix and a bottom-line solution. Under pressure they can be ill-tempered and quick to anger. Give them options so you don't threaten their need for control. Don't waste their time with chitchat; stick to business. While at the other extreme, the stress-prone analytical style requires more information and is interested in every detail. Their cautious and analytical nature makes them susceptible to buyer's remorse. Be sensitive to their need for reassurance and guarantees. Once you learn how to identify each of the

four primary behavioral styles, you will be able to work more effectively with all of your customers.

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## Communicate Effectively

Recognize the importance of nonverbal communication and learn to "listen with your eyes." It might surprise you to know that research indicates more than 70 percent of our communication is perceived nonverbally. In fact, studies show that body language has a much greater impact and reliability than the spoken word.

Create a favorable first impression and build rapport quickly by using open body language. In addition to smiling and making good eye contact, you should show the palms of your hands, keep your arms unfolded and your legs uncrossed. You can develop harmony by "matching and mirroring" your customer's body language gestures. Matching and mirroring is unconscious mimicry. It's a way of subconsciously telling another that you like them and agree with them.

Improve your active listening skills. To develop and encourage conversation, use open-ended questions to probe the meaning behind your prospect's statements. Occasionally repeat your prospect's words

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verbatim. By restating his or her key words or phrases, you not only clarify communication, but also build rapport. Keep your attention focused on what your customer is saying and avoid the temptation to interrupt, argue or dominate the conversation.

#### **Little Things Make a Big Difference**

Rendering quality customer service is both a responsibility and an opportunity. Often salespeople view customer service as an administrative burden that takes them away from making a sale. The truth is that customer service provides opportunities for cross-selling, up-selling and generating quality referrals.

Customers describe quality customer service in terms of attention to detail and responsiveness. Customer satisfaction surveys consistently point to the fact that the little things make a big difference. Not surprisingly, the top two customer complaints with

regard to customer service are unreturned phone calls and a failure to keep promises and commitments. Make an effort to see yourself through your customers' eyes. True customer service is meeting and surpassing your customers' expectations.

Successful salespeople "go the extra mile" when providing service and turn the customers they serve into advocates to help them promote their business. Your referrals and follow-on business are in direct proportion to the quality and quantity of service you render on a daily basis. Want more referrals? Improve your service!

Here are five powerful customer-service tips:

- Under-promise and over-deliver. Develop a reputation for reliability; never make a promise that you can't keep. Your word is your bond.
- Pay attention to the small things. Get in the habit of returning phone calls, e-mails and other correspondence quickly. Follow up, follow up, follow up.
- Stay in contact and keep good records. Take the time to jot down notes from meetings and phone calls, making certain to record all relevant information. Maintain a written record of service. This is especially helpful when clients are reassigned to a new sales rep. Set up a suspense system to track important contact dates such as client review calls and birthdays. Consider sending a personal note or an article of interest every six months.
- Give your customers a promotional gift. Consider sending them a letter opener, coffee mug or a calendar with your picture and contact information.
- Establish a feedback system to monitor how your customers perceive the quality and quantity of the service you provide. Service is not defined by what you think it is, but rather how your customers perceive its value. When it comes to customer service, perception is reality.

Progressive companies emphasize commitment to customer service from the top down by establishing training standards and continuously monitoring customer satisfaction. Companies that fail to implement an effective customer-service program actually do a disservice to their customers and unknowingly leave the back door open to their competitors. If you do it correctly, sales and service blend seamlessly, and you will exceed your customers' expectations! □

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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