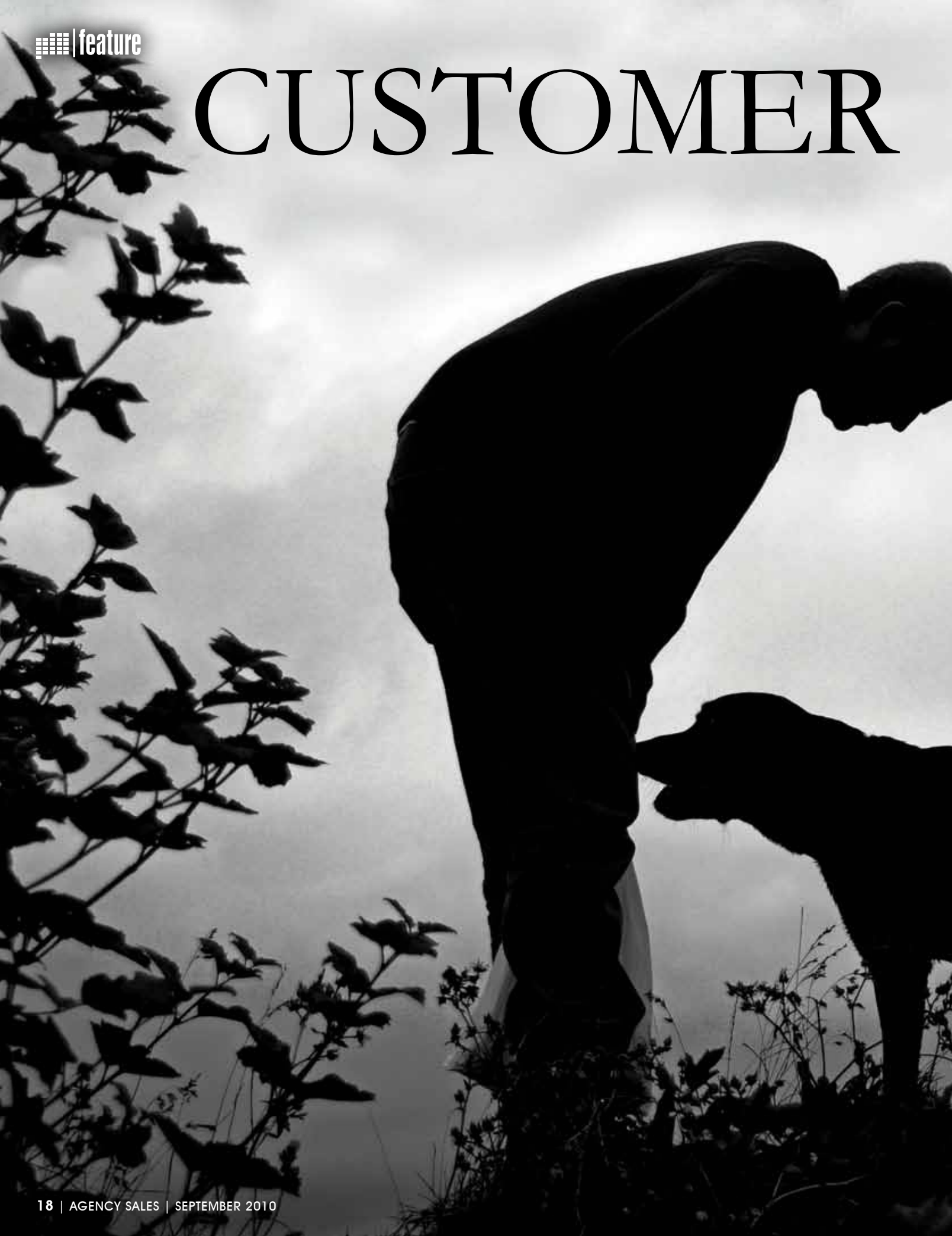


CUSTOMER



CARE ACTIONS THAT BUILD SALES

Taking the time to build trust and loyalty with your customers could pay off substantially in the long run. Some common courtesies can make the difference between no sale and repeat business. **BY JOHN GRAHAM**

IT'S easy for just about anyone in business – including companies, salespeople and marketers – to fall into a “pattern” when dealing with customers. We all develop shortcuts and “templates” to help simplify our daily routines, which also make it easier to manage the work load. With more to do and less time to do it, a smoother routine is appealing.

While such an approach may help us get through the day, it can also be dangerous, particularly when the competition is waiting for even the slightest opening that could get them through the door.

Customers don't want to be taken for granted or only receive attention when we want to sell them something. They respond positively to the signals that say, “We really appreciate having you as a customer.”

Here are several customer care actions that will help to enhance customer satisfaction, which will build sales.

Contact customers when it's not necessary. Apple consultant Craig Batt of MacShaman checks with clients a week or so after doing a job. Not only does he ask for feedback on what he did, but he passes along helpful information that's not directly related to his work. It sends the message that he not only appreciates their business, but the relationship as well.

Customers don't want to be **TAKEN FOR GRANTED** or only receive attention when **we want to sell** them something.

Let them know how much you like working with them. Why take a chance or assume that they know? Letting them know in writing why you like working with them puts it squarely on the record, and it usually winds

up in a frame hanging on the wall in the customer's office. If you don't tell them, how will they know?

Ask them what you can do to make working with you easier. Even when you have a good working relationship with a customer, there still may be something that bothers them. While it may not be a relationship breaker, it can still be a burr under the saddle. It's always

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good to uncover the issue and get rid of it.

Tell their story to others. Word-of-mouth still has power, perhaps more than ever. So, when it's appropriate and you have the opportunity, speak up about your clients. “I know that company, and they're good people. They've always treated me fairly.” Such words carry weight.

Pass along leads. A good lead may be the greatest gift you can give anyone. A customer will appreciate it far more than tickets to a game or a round of golf. Although a lead is free, it has tremendous value for the recipient. It also shows that you care.

Do something a little extra. Bill Donahue, the owner of Crown Supply, an electrical and fire alarm wholesaler in Providence, RI, always thanks his customers for doing business with him. Then, he realized that it's the people in the field who call and actually place the orders. It's their loyalty that makes the difference. Bill knows they can call other supply houses, so he sends a personal thank you to them several times a year, along with a gift card.

Make suggestions for improving their operation. Your knowledge base is unique, and your experience can complement that of your customers. Your helpful suggestions give meaning to being a partner.

Pass along helpful information. Customers will view you as a resource if you pass along useful information. Whether it's an article or an idea, it lets them know that you are thinking of them.

Lend a hand. Every customer has a crisis or some time when they need help. Ed Testa of Champion Capital, an

equipment leasing company, spends a lot of time at trade shows, but not where you might expect. You won't find him at a Champion Capital booth. He'll be busy working a client's booth. "They're always short handed," he says, "and they appreciate the extra help." He also writes a lot of business that way.

Utilize the power of recognition. Whether it's recommending a customer for an award or suggesting them for a news story, you can play a role in helping to bring them well-deserved recognition.

Be candid when asked for your opinion. It's a pivotal moment when a customer asks your opinion. Will you be a wimp or will you be candid? Candor creates respect, even though someone might not agree with you.

Show your loyalty. After doing a good job for a customer, that's when one of their competitors wants to give you their business. You may be flattered, but think twice before compromising your loyalty.

Don't cut corners. When a customer has been around for a while, there's a tendency to put them on autopilot, where you're doing what's necessary, but also coasting. If the customer doesn't figure it out first, a competitor won't be far behind to move right in.

Come to a customer's defense when you hear criticism. There may be times when "silence is golden," but not when someone is criticizing a customer. That's when it's the right time to make known your experience.

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When something hasn't gone well, let them know what you would like to do about it. Yes, things go wrong, no matter how hard we try. When this happens, jump on it quickly and tell the customer what you're going to do to solve it.

Respond reliably. A recent survey of buyers found that getting back to them in a timely manner is one of the things they value most. A highly successful life insurance salesperson serving wealthy clients credits part of his success to returning every telephone call and answering every e-mail the day they are received.

Leverage the power of "free." Insurance agent Mark


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Rosenthal has a free offer for a helpful tool he prepared. It's called "Organizing Your Personal Affairs," and it's about getting important information together. Others make reports, survey results and articles available without charge. But remember, free means free, no strings attached.

Take the initiative. Step up to the plate and act before you're asked. Initiative shows you have ideas and are capable of undertaking new and challenging tasks. Showing initiative may be the best way to be viewed as outstanding.

Keep your word. If you say you're going to do it, do it. If for some reason you can't, then explain why and do it quickly. It's easy to get a bad rep – and it's difficult to get rid of it.

Show respect. Getting too friendly with some customers can undermine the customer-salesperson relationship. There should always be some distance as a way of showing respect.

Individually, each of these customer care actions has value, but when taken together, their impact can be enormous, even transformative. 



JOHN GRAHAM

is president of Graham Communications, a marketing services and sales consulting firm. He writes and speaks on business, marketing and sales issues. Contact him at 40 Oval Road, Quincy, Massachusetts 02170, 617-328-0069 or jgraham@grahamcomm.com. The company's website is grahamcomm.com.