

Great Customer Service

The Key to Loyalty and Retention

It's clear that the ISO business is changing in ways that aren't always obvious, but one thing is clear: To survive and thrive, today's ISO must find a way to stand out in an increasingly homogenous industry and must make merchant retention a fundamental focus of its business strategy.

While some companies are turning to new technology, squeezing margins or selling ancillary products to differentiate themselves and hang on to existing clients, one area that's easy to overlook but can put an ISO over the top is great customer service.

ISOs often lament that merchants aren't loyal. That's probably true, but what if that lack of loyalty were viewed not as a fact you have to live with, but as a symptom, like a fever? Is it a symptom worth treating? Will that treatment cure the disloyalty?

Experts say it will. A loyal client is a differentiating factor. It generates referrals and sets an ISO apart as one who comes recommended, usually by a source the prospect considers trustworthy. And loyalty is the key to retention, even in the face of the stiffest price competition.

What is top-flight customer service and how do you create it? A top-notch customer service operation has a little to

do with rules and procedures and a great deal to do with attitude. Even if you can't give customers everything they want or solve every problem, how you tackle situations and how you treat customers during the process will determine how customers rate your performance.

Management consultant and customer service expert F. John Reh says that the principles of great customer service are simple. Here are some of his top customer service principles:

Know your customer

If you're selling directly to end-users, it's obvious who the customer is. But if you're managing a sales force, the end-user isn't your only customer. Your salespeople also are customers, and how you deal with them will affect how they deal with their customers.

Know who is boss

You are in business to serve customers, and you can do that only if you know what your customers want. When you truly listen to your customers, they let you know what they want and how you can provide good service.

Be a good listener

Identify customer needs by asking questions and concentrating on what

your customers are really saying. Listen to their words, tone of voice, body language and, most importantly, how they feel. Beware of making assumptions—thinking you intuitively know what your customers want. Assess, don't assume.

Identify and anticipate needs

Customers don't buy products or services. They buy good feelings and solutions to problems. Most customer needs are emotional rather than logical. The more you know your customers, the better you become at anticipating their needs. Communicate regularly so that you are aware of problems or upcoming needs.

Make customers feel important and appreciated

Customers are very sensitive and know whether or not you really care about them. Thank them every time you get a chance.

Help customers understand how your company works

Your organization may have the world's best systems for getting things done, but if customers don't under-

stand them, they can get confused, impatient and angry.

Appreciate the power of “Yes”

Always look for ways to help your customers. When they have a request, tell them that you can do it. Figure out how afterward. Look for ways to make doing business with you easy. Always do what you say you are going to do.

Know how to apologize

When something goes wrong, apologize. It is easy and customers like it. The customer may not always be right, but the customer must always win. Deal with problems immediately and let customers know what you have done. Make it simple for customers to complain. Value their complaints.

Give more than expected

Since the future of all companies lies in keeping customers happy, think of

ways to elevate yourself above the competition. Consider the following:

- ◆ What can you give customers that they cannot get elsewhere?
- ◆ What can you do to follow up and thank people even when they don't buy?
- ◆ What can you give customers that is totally unexpected?

Get regular feedback

Encourage suggestions about how you could improve. There are several ways that you can find out what customers think and feel about your services. Listen carefully to what they say. Follow up to see how things are going and provide a method that invites constructive criticism, comments and suggestions.

Treat employees and contractors well

Everyone who works for you is an internal customer and needs a regular dose of appreciation. Thank them and

find ways to let them know how important they are. Treat them with respect and chances are they will have a higher regard for customers. Appreciation stems from the top. Treating customers and employees well is equally important.

“Some say customer service is not personal, it's only business,” says sales trainer and motivational speaker Steve Aduabato. “Well, don't believe it. When you help someone solve a big problem or provide the kind of service that improves their business or their quality of life, that's not just business, that's very personal.”

Building a reputation for great customer service—and getting the merchant loyalty that comes with it—is a long-term process. Says Reh: “It's an attitude that has to permeate the organization from top to bottom.”

Keeping that reputation means empowering your sales force to solve problems as they arise and, when possible, to the benefit of the customer. **TT**

