

by Debra Kahn Schofield

Guerrillas know the importance of customer service. Often, with competitors offering identical products at comparable prices, the only thing that will set you apart is the human element. It was department store founder John Wanamaker who said "the customer is king." Do you treat your customers like royalty? Does your staff?

Your employees and salespeople take their cue from you. If you establish a policy of bending over backwards to provide superb customer service, you'll have a courteous and flexible staff. I'm not joking here. Flexibility is an essential component of your business policy. Obviously a small business can't survive without procedures and policies. But it's equally important to empower your employees to consider situations on an individual basis and make exceptions when necessary. If you are willing to see a customer as a unique individual in a specific predicament and adjust your policies accordingly, you will have a customer who feels special.

A terrific way to improve your company's customer service is to call a brainstorming session of all of your employees. Include everyone from the mail clerk to the receptionist. Especially the receptionist as he or she is the initial contact with the customer. No matter what their level of training or education, when they go home at night, every one of your employees is a customer. Ask them to recount personal stories of both excellent and lousy service. Ask them about experiences at airports, hotels, car rental companies and restaurants just to start them off. Everyone will attest to lost luggage at airport destinations, lumpy hotel beds, car rental firms not holding the reservation for a specified class of car. And almost everyone has dealt with rude waiters or apathetic flight attendants.

Here are some questions for you and your staff to ask yourselves. Your answers will help you make a top management commitment to improving customer service.

1) Do You Understand the Customer?

Do you know what your customers value? More than what they think about the product's attributes, what do the customers want, need and expect from it?

2) Do You Place the Customer at the Center?

Does your selling and marketing strategy center on satisfying the values and meeting the expectations of profitable customers, adjusting your sales approach, pricing, and services when necessary? Are you able to pinpoint customers who will remain loyal and focus extra attention on them?

3) Are You Retaining Existing Customers?

In your haste to build up your customer base, do you ensure that your loyal customers aren't neglected? Are you accessible, accountable, and committed to them?

4) Do You Develop Pro-Customer Policies?

Remind your employees that their job entails providing the customers with personal attention,

individual offerings, guarantees, information and help, when requested? Forbid them to ever utter the phrase, "that's not my job."

Once your employees feel empathy with the customers, they will spontaneously make an extra effort to be kind and courteous. You can inspire your employees to be terrific service providers with frequent encouragement, training, reviews and reward programs.