

Five customer service musts to thrive in any economy

BY SHARON DILLARD | GUEST COLUMNIST

In these difficult economic times, people are trying to find a magic wand to help improve their businesses. They've realized that nickel and diming their customers must be replaced with personal touches that emphasize how important the customer is not only to their bottom line, but also to their very survival. They're returning to the notion that business has always had at its base: the people-to-people relationship.

One of the most important lessons we try to impart to our new franchisees during their two-week on the job training in Albuquerque is that customer service is perhaps the single factor that will make them successful. Sure, they can learn to be great technicians so that applying our product becomes something they can do in their sleep. But caring for the customer is something that everyone must attend to every single day. In fact, I would venture that 80 percent of any business' success is how people-focused the customer service is.

Still, it amazes me when I experience businesses where the customer is seen as an annoyance rather than the reason for being. In our training program, we teach franchisees to answer their phones, and if they can't, to return calls immediately. We teach them to have business cards, and to keep them handy, because anyone is a potential client. We teach them that wearing clean, company logo clothing makes a professional impression. We teach them

to make sales calls, and not just when business is slow. It's the one-on-one interaction with a current or potential customer that will remain in the customers' minds at decision time, not pricing.

Today's marketplace is full of cost-saving tools for both businesses and customers. Ordering a product from a website is quick and efficient. But what happens when there's a problem with the product or service? Customers will pay more for a product when they know that exceptional customer service comes along with the price. When the customer in customer service is lost, people go elsewhere. They go where they are treated well, even if the product or service is out of warranty. When businesses with lousy customer service are long gone, those with great service reap the rewards.

Though they are not automatic, here are five simple things that will delight customers and show them you care about them:

1. Greet them with a smile. First impressions are extremely important. It costs nothing to be pleasant, and you can do it over the phone, too. A genuinely friendly greeting shows customers that you are happy they are there, that you're excited to give exceptional service. It tells the customer how we feel about our job and ourselves.

2. Focus on them. It's not about you, your problems, or your next sale. It's about the problem you can solve for the customer. Your full attention is key, and the courtesy of your attention is the single most impor-

tant behavior a customer expects.

3. Make it easy for them to do business with you. Make your process easy. Be organized in your thoughts. Keep your customer area organized and tidy. Have a toll free phone number for out of area callers. Write your contracts in plain English and make them easy to read. Include a self-addressed stamped envelope or website link for customer surveys.

4. Be honest and sincere. Nothing will spoil a relationship faster than getting the runaround or being lied to. So never promise something you can't deliver, and never make up an answer if you don't know what the answer is. When you tell customers you'll call them by a certain day or time, do it, even if you have nothing to report.

5. Thank them. Express heartfelt appreciation for their patronage. Be gracious, and not only if they buy something from you. Treat people better than you treat your family and guests. Showing thanks is often the difference between a return customer and a one-time sale. It is the end of the interaction that leaves the biggest impression.

Exceptional customer service can make the difference between surviving and thriving in this competitive marketplace.

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CORRECTIONS

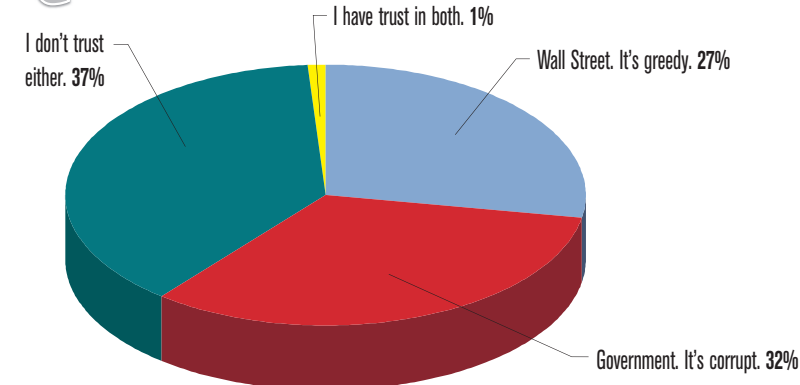
The May 21 story "NM cities draw on big art exhibits to lure tourists" should have stated that Santa Fe was the only stop in the West for the "Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction" exhibit. The Business Weekly regrets the editing error.

The May 21 Film Frames column should have clarified that Don Levy is vice president of media and entertainment for Cinnafilm and that Cinnafilm's system is installed in post-production houses around the world, including: Berlin; Copenhagen, Denmark; London; Los Angeles; Moscow; Munich, Germany; New York City; Paris; and Vancouver, B.C.

BUSINESS Survey

Weekly Web Poll Results

Q: Whom do you trust less, Wall Street or the federal government?



POLL COMMENTS

It's not prudent to trust not only Wall Street and the federal government, but also any element of government or the financial world. Just look at our own state government. It is as untrustworthy as any felon; its components just get away with it.

• Both entities are out for their own best interests. At least with Wall Street, I get a cut, supposedly. With the federal government, however, they could care beans about the likes of me. Unfortunately, they are both necessary evils, at least in this society and culture.

• It's an individual's choice whether to put their trust in Wall Street with their dollars. Not much individual choice with the government. However, both are corrupted by individual and collective greed.

Question of the Week:

What do you think of the Tea Party, its ideas and methodologies?

To vote on the next poll question go to:
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New Mexico Business Weekly is a publication of American City Business Journals Inc., 120 West Morehead St., Suite 400, Charlotte, NC 28202

Whitney Shaw, President & CEO

Ray Shaw, Chairman (1989 to 2009)

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