

10 Strategies for Building Customer Trust

©copyright Robert (Bob) W. Lucas

People do business with those they trust. Fail to appear trustworthy or perform in a manner that casts doubt on your ethics, capabilities or commitment to your customers and you can guarantee the loss of current and potential customers.

Considering that trust is a fragile commodity, you must be attentive to your deeds and actions in order to ensure that you are projecting an image of an organization that cares about its customers. Every contact that you or another organizational representative has with someone is a critical incident related to service. What you do and say, how you communicate, and the appearance of your facility, website, and correspondence all play a role in how someone evaluates you and your organization. There is no such thing as an unimportant factor when dealing with people. Say the wrong word or under-deliver on a promise and you risk a relationship breakdown.

While errors are normal and misunderstandings do occur, the following ten simple tips for building and strengthening trust can help reduce the opportunity of customers losing faith in you and your organization.

1. Hire the right people. One of the biggest mistakes that employers make in selecting service representatives is thinking they can hire anyone at a cheap wage and train them to be an effective service provider. Job and product knowledge or previous experience in does not make someone good at dealing with customers. A good service provider needs to have a personality that is outgoing and a desire to work with others. They also need to be good at problem solving and decision making. Job task skills can be taught, personality cannot.

2. Train employees to effectively interact with others. Like anything else service is a skill that requires knowledge and practice to perfect it. When dealing with customers, you are dealing with humans. Each person is unique, complex and has particular needs and perceptions of what excellent service involves. To address these complexities, service providers need to understand differences in behavioral styles, have strong interpersonal communication skills (e.g. verbal, nonverbal and listening).

3. Communicate effectively and convincingly. It does not matter how much you know, or think you know; if you cannot communicate your knowledge to others, you will not be effective in convincing them to believe you or in working with you. A key in communicating for trust is to provide more than simple facts or figures. Project your feeling as you communicate; this makes you appear more human and approachable. For example, if a customer calls to complain about a delivery, product or service breakdown,

empathize with them (e.g. “I can see why you would be upset Mr. Haulk. I would be upset to), tell them what you can do (e.g. I am going to call our supplier right now and get back to you with an explanation within the next half hour), and then follow-up by getting back to them to discuss options. If the situation still cannot be resolved, find a way to appease or compensate for the trouble caused by the breakdown (e.g. I apologize, however, the products did not arrive from China as promised. They are expected by next Friday. I can refund 50% of your delivery charge for the inconvenience, if that will help).

4. Demonstrate that you are capable. Obviously your boss believed you had the basic qualifications to do your job or you would not have been hired. It is up to you to show that their belief was well founded by effectively handling whatever customer situation arises. You need to perform in a manner that convinces others that they can depend on you to get the job done. In dealing with customers this means being competent and confident. Avoid passive language, such as “I think...” or “I can try to...” Customers do not want someone who appears tentative or unsure handling their needs, especially when there is a problem to be resolved. Instead of such vague language, use phrases such as, “I can...” “I will...” or “I can certainly take care of that.”

5. Follow up with customers. Too many service providers assume that if they provided what the customer asked or paid for that their job is done until the next time the customer contacts them. In a highly competitive global marketplace where similar products and services are only a mouse click away, this is a foolish approach to business. Remember the old saying, “out of sight, out of mind?” Well, when you are not actively communicating with your customers, this is likely where you are with most customers. If another organization comes into view (e.g. an advertisement, brochure, flyer, internet site, article, billboard, or word of mouth) at a time when a customer has an immediate need, they are likely to take the easy way out when obtaining what they want. This is why you must maintain constant contact with current and former customers. Send out birthday cards, sales notices (in the mail or via electronic means), call them, conduct satisfaction surveys, send or give long-lasting promotional items (e.g. mugs, t-shirts, or pc mouse pads) that they will see and be reminded of you on a regular basis.

6. Under promise and over deliver. Customers expect that you will provide the promised service or product for which they paid. When they receive extras or service beyond their expectations, they are typically “wowed” and encouraged to return and to spread the word about their positive experience. The latter can lead to enhanced reputation and additional revenue. An example of wowing your customers might occur if they buy 10 of an item and you give an 11th one free, they book 2 nights at your hotel and they get a 3rd free, they dine with you and you give a \$10 gift certificate for a future

visit, or they purchase a suit and you throw in a silk tie as a gift. In this economy, people are looking for added value in addition to excellent service.

7. Display concern for customers. Place your emphasis on helping your customers rather than enforcing policy. By being available and willing to assist when necessary you show that you have your customer's needs in mind. Avoid language such as, "Our policy says..." or "I cannot do that because..." Such language only tends to put customers on the defensive and set up a combative situation in which no one wins.

8. Be consistent. Nothing will turn your customers against you and your organization faster than a perception that you are inconsistent in your treatment of customers. For example, someone brings a product back for a refund and you tell them that returns are not accepted. Two months earlier they returned a different item and it was allowed by another clerk. They are likely to become upset and ask for a manager. In order to avoid problems and resentment make sure that you and your peers know what the policies are, find out your level of authority for circumventing policy before customers ask, and keep the big picture of retaining satisfied customers in mind.

9. Admit you are wrong or do not know. People generally warm up to service providers who appear to be human. And, to err or not have all the answers is human. You can often win someone over by appealing to them for understanding, but do so in a sincere manner or not just to make them feel patronized. Otherwise, they might become incensed. If you make a mistake, quickly do whatever you have to do, and are allowed to, in order to appease the customer. Do this in a friendly, positive and professional manner.

10. Trust your customers. Most customers are not out to cheat or "rip you and your organization off." If you suspect the latter is not true, then you can escalate to a manager, security or the appropriate party. Otherwise, give customers the benefit of the doubt during your interactions. By showing you trust them; you can often gain their trust in return. One way to demonstrate your trust is to share information freely and quickly. If information about a policy or issue is not proprietary, confidential or damaging, pass the information on to your customer. It is human nature for most people to want to be in on decisions which affect them and have some control of situations.

Bob Lucas B.S., M.A., M.A, CPLP is an internationally-known author and learning and performance professional. He has written and contributed to thirty-one books and compilations. He regularly conducts creative training, train-the-trainer, customer service, interpersonal communication and management and supervisory skills workshops. Bob can be reached at blucas@robertwlucas.com or through his website www.robertwlucas.com. Follow his blog at www.robertwlucas.com/wordpress and like him at www.facebook.com/robertwlucasenterprises