

Wowing Your Customers in a Lackluster World

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If it seems to you that service providers have become more complacent recently and that the quality of service that they provide has dropped in many instances, you are probably right. In an era when fortunes have plummeted, people struggle to find or keep a job, families are stretched to the breaking point, organizations struggle to stay afloat, anxiety levels are peaking, optimism is often replaced with pessimism, and there is chaos all around the world, service providers often seem to take it out on their customers. They do this through indifference, lack of enthusiasm, and in some cases blatant rudeness.

The impact of bad service

The unfortunate part of a deterioration in service levels is that at a time when competition is fierce to get and keep customers, many organizations are implementing policies and allowing employee actions that do just the opposite. Many service providers seem to do just enough related to service to keep their job and to ensure they do not raise the ire of their supervisors. Forget “Do you want fries with that hamburger?” “What else can I do to assist you?” or “Thank you for shopping at ____.” Today you are much more likely to hear, “It’s not my job,” “You have to call ____ for that,” or “They won’t let me do that” in response to a customer need or request. The term self-service often takes on a revived meaning when dealing with some service providers today.

What to do about the problem

That is the bad news. The good news is that it does not have to be that way. Proactive supervisors and organizations are dusting off some old techniques for impressing or wowing customers. In some cases, they are also coming up with new approaches to fit the needs of today’s customers. In a time when money is tight, many of the strategies are cost-effective and more heartfelt. To help your organization maintain market share while wowing your customers, start thinking of ways to enhance the service experience.

Consider the following ideas when planning your service strategy:

Retail organizations

- Benchmark against successful competitors and trendsetters in your industry.
- Wow your customers with the unexpected. For example, when someone orders something online and pays for standard shipping, give them expedited service and get their products there sooner.
- If you find out that someone is celebrating a special event like an anniversary, promotion, childbirth, or birthday, take 10% off their dining bill or treat them to a free dessert.
- Provide coupons for future visits to everyone who makes a purchase. This encourages their return or perhaps they will give the coupon to a friend and generate a new customer.
- Partner with complementary organizations to offer special deals. For example, if you sell cars, partner with a local carwash to give one free detailing service or a monthly carwash for a period of time.

- Send out email notices of upcoming special sales or events and offer coupons to customers who provide their email addresses.
- Give a free shampoo to all new customers in your hair salon or barbershop.
- Give a free pair of ankle socks to someone who purchases a pair of running shoes.
- Put mints on a guest's pillow in your hotel or bed and breakfast, along with a discount coupon for a local horse carriage ride or attraction that you have partnered with.

Professional practices and organizations

- Provide a free teeth whitening to new dental patients.
- Send a gift card from local businesses with whom you have partnered to customers who refer friends or relatives to your practice.
- Provide a free one hour coaching session on home buying to potential real estate clients.
- Do a free eye exam to any client who gets a friend to schedule an appointment to have their vision checked or buys eyeglasses.
- Clean carpets in one room for every two rooms that a client schedules to have cleaned.
- Offer one free pool inspection and cleaning to anyone who signs up for a year of pool services.
- Provide a booklet of coupons good for free bottles of water, provided by a local store, with which you have partnered, to each person who signs up on a one-year gym contract.
- Launder one shirt for every two that a client brings in.
- Offer a free wash and manicure to anyone who signs up for dog walking services.
- Provide a free pc cleaning and checkup for anyone who contracts to have you design their website. If you do not offer such services, partner with someone who does and offer coupons to your customers.

Associations and non-profit organizations

- Offer one month of free membership to anyone who becomes a new member. Offer three months of free membership to any renewing members. Since keeping current members is cheaper than recruiting new ones, this makes sense.
- Provide free travel kits to members who refer someone who becomes a new member.
- Send out free baseball caps or other promotional items with the organization's logo on them to members who submit suggestions for improving service.

All organizations

- Develop a creative website that is easy to navigate, informative, provides free things (e.g. coupons, articles, and white papers) to visitors. Also, allow people to join as members or account holders in order to receive things that other visitors do not see or get (e.g. advance opportunity to buy, members only sale information, special coupons, or free gifts).
- Create and offer free webinars for people who sign up for user groups on your website.
- Have someone in the organization tasked with creating and maintaining an account on social media and bookmarking sites like Facebook.com, Twitter.com, YouTube.com, selfgrowth.com, and LinkedIn.com.
- Provide coaching services on topics on which your organization or staff specializes.

Great service is not a mystery. Simply ask your customers what they expect, provide what you can, think outside the box to identify service success strategies and demand nothing less than service that wows from your staff. To accomplish the latter, provide quality training, equipment, tools, management support, and resource materials to employees. Additionally, if you reward quality service efforts, employees will in turn typically respond with dedication, enthusiasm, and a desire to help customers and clients.

As your organization struggles to survive and possibly redefine itself in an unsure business environment, you have an inexpensive tool to help you stand out from your competition – quality customer service. By training staff, being proactive in delivering what you promise, and ensuring that your customer's needs and wants are met to the best degree possible, you can set a level of excellence that will truly wow your customers. The result will be increased market share or placement in your industry or profession.

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