



Customer Service is like Dating....at least the rules are the same!

By Nancy Georges

The most important ingredient in the recipe for success is your customer – without the customer there is no retail business. Consumers are getting savvier and are far more knowledgeable than ever before. They are more demanding and have more choices now than ever before.

Compare retail now and past, as close as 3 years ago, and you would be looking at a different industry. In the past customers accepted bad customer service as the norm. Today's customer no longer accepts it, is vocal and can influence others, on and off line!

It is not enough to know who your customers are, you need to know what their needs are, what appeals to them, where they are and how to treat them. You also need to recognise that not everybody that walks into your store is a customer and that you cannot be all things to all people. So select and define your customer carefully.

The right customer profile will ensure that you buy the right product, have the right staff and communicate effectively, ensuring you will maximise the profitability of your business.

It is my belief that each business does not really sell the products on the shelf, it sells customer service and this is what sets one store apart from the others. I have always viewed Customer Service as problem solving, customers come into your store with a need, sometimes they don't know what this is, and it is your job to solve the problem or find something that meets the need.

Once you have defined your customer and their needs, then you can start to build a relationship with them. By meeting their needs you will build trust and comfort with your customer, they feel good about shopping in your store, they know that you are the authority and they trust they are getting value when they shop in your store.

Defining what is good customer service is harder than it sounds. It is not as simple as saying 'please' and 'thank you' and smiling at them when they enter the store (although these are important too!).

Customer Service is having what they want, when they want it. Customer Service encompasses every element and aspect of your business that communicates how your store and your products meet the needs and wants of the customer.

It is great to build the relationship but you need to have the goods to back it up.

Exceptional Customer Service is going that extra step that the customer does not expect or experience with your competitors. It must be constant and consistent.

Exceptional Customer Service happens before, during and after the sale.

In the current retail market, the competitive advantage of each business will be their customer service. It is no longer enough to have just good customer service, you need to aspire to EXCEPTIONAL CUSTOMER SERVICE in order to stand out. Despite its importance to the business' success, many retailers still get it wrong and have low standards.

Think of Exceptional Customer Service in the same way as DATING.

The attraction, the getting to know each other/ trust building and then the familiarity and comfort and lastly wanting to be around each other all the time!

Excite & seduce your current, new and potential customers to ensure the relationship is established and grows.

In the past; people were looking for a mate to start a family with as per society's norm and customer service was not a high priority of retailers or customers. Now the expectations are vastly different; people are looking for a partner who satisfies a long list of needs and customers are demanding exceptional customer service. Customers and daters are now looking for 'The Total Package'.

Let's look at the vital elements of exceptional customer service in comparison with dating:

- You want to attract your customer at first glance, you must put effort into your appearance and not just for the first meeting or date, you must always look your best
- You must be honest, polite and respectful, ALWAYS
- Make sure you have enough in common, otherwise your objectives will not be met and you will be wasting each others' time
- Deliver what you promise and don't promise what you can't deliver!
- Be realistic, don't try and turn them into something they are not
- Use the approach and 'language' that suits the subject, you need to be adaptable
- Ask questions and LISTEN to the answers
- Learn all you can about them and use this in your communication with them, to make your interaction with them relevant
- Once you have identified their current needs, anticipate their future needs

- Use humour and creativity to build and maintain the relationship
- When you spend time together focus on them, don't look over their shoulder at what else is happening
- Constantly communicate and keep up to date with each other, don't lose touch
- Accept constructive criticism as a way of making the relationship stronger and maybe changing some of your bad habits!
- Thank them every chance you get – show them they are valued
- Recognise that sometimes you have to lose the battle to win the war.
There will be times when you have to apologise to a valued customer, even when you know you are right, for the long term on-going relationship.
- Encourage them to introduce you to their friends!
- Surprise them with your thoughtfulness
- As we know that if any of these things are not genuine and maintained the relationship will not last and you have to do it over and over again, till you get it right!!

When you achieve this level of Exceptional Customer Service, your customer will shop without resistance. When you suggest an add-on product, they will see this as a valuable suggestion that will help them not a pushy sales person trying to make money. This is where you want to be to achieve profitable sales.

I used to manage the Manchester Department at Grace Bros. We had our regular customers and my staff and I made it our business to remember what they had bought or what they liked. If new stock came in that we thought they would like or a pattern they bought was going to be marked-down, we would call them (no email or sms then!) before it was put on the floor or the sale started. We made them feel important/special and offered them value. Over 50% of these conversations turned into a sale and over 50% of the sales resulted in other items being added to the purchase.

You want customers to become addicted to your great customer service and come back for more. Each time they come back they reaffirm their decision to come into your store and feel better than the last time. This repeat business is more profitable than the first sale.

Acquiring new customers is expensive. The cost of the first sale is more than double the cost of a returning customer. To ensure you have a profitable business you need to maintain a high rate of returning/repeat business.

Only 60% of satisfied customers do business with you again. So you really need to be aiming at 100% satisfaction to ensure profitable repeat business.

Exceptional Customer Service is one aspect that needs to be maintained and innovated continually to ensure customers do not go elsewhere. It is important to ensure that this is ongoing and evolving to encourage interest. Remember, there is a fine line, do not get too familiar so as to make your customer uncomfortable..

Develop a strategy for potential, new and regular customers. You need to do different things to entice and retain each type. If your strategy and systems have been developed properly, this will happen automatically without effort. We work with clients to analyse the business and develop a system and program to ensure the best results.



As The Retail 'Miss Fix It' and the Chief of Ideas at Magnolia Solutions, I have drawn on my own experience of over 20 years in retail and with my first business Paper Magnolia, to help clients create integrated marketing solutions online and offline that are based on sound retail practices.

In 2009, I gave myself the challenge of finding a super low cost solution to get Paper Magnolia started selling online. At the same time, I started to use this new 'thing' called Social Media with great results! In 2010 I co-founded Social Media Women and continue to support new social media users. I hope my experience will help you start off on the right foot.

I work with retailers, manufacturers, brands and service-providers in various roles including external Marketing Manager. My focus is on Customer Service, marketing, new media, product, retail principles and retail as a craft. I utilise online and offline tools in a wholistic approach. I am an avid user and participator in Social Media as an extension of my marketing activity.

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