

Five Steps to Keep Your Company Thriving in Tough Times

Strengthen Customer Loyalty and Improve Your Bottom Line By Uplifting Employee-Customer Relations

By Alain J Roy

IN A SLUGGISH ECONOMY, CONSUMERS SPEND LESS AND LESS. But that doesn't mean your business has to suffer. Tough economic times offer new opportunities and proven methods of ensuring your company's growth, namely: retaining your existing customers, taking business away from competitors, and improving your operating margins.

As you know, "totally satisfied" customers are much more likely to remain loyal to your company than those who are merely "satisfied." Offering a good product at a good price in a good location will always be important. But it is the interaction between your front-line employees and your customers that can create or destroy bonds of loyalty. In order to attract, satisfy and retain customers, you must know what they need, expect and perceive in every phase of each transaction.

We are the Best. 100% Satisfaction Guaranteed. Quality is Job One. We Never Stop Working for You. These enticing taglines build up huge customer expectations. Companies spend millions of dollars to create these marketing promises in an effort to attract new customers and build relationships. Yet when it comes to delivering on these promises and fulfilling customer expectations, many companies fall drastically short. The blame for the resulting losses is usually directed at front-line employees.

As a consumer, you've probably experienced the frustration of being bounced around in voice-mail when you need to have a question answered by your bank or insurance company. "What happened to *The Customer Comes First?*" you may wonder.

All too often, a huge gap exists between what customers expect and what they actually receive. In such cases, the relationship, or "trust factor," between customer and company may be forever broken.

A damaging cycle results: the customer may never return, choosing instead to go with a competitor. Employee performance continuously diminishes due to lowered morale. The company is forced to dream up new slogans and new promises to attract new customers. However, the company may have failed to identify its ideal customers in the first place, and may have further neglected to invest in the development of acceptable employee/customer relations guidelines. Customer expectations are not fulfilled, and the trust factor is broken once again. Needless to say, the economic losses of this recurring cycle can be considerable.

However, your company can avoid this debilitating cycle by pinpointing problem areas and achieving your goals of customer satisfaction and retention through the following five steps:

1) Measure customer expectations.

There must be a valuable reason to explain why customers have chosen to patronize your place of business. Was it your marketing campaign that attracted them? Was it the sign on the building? Was it word of mouth? Was it the promise of great food, quality products, excellent service, friendly staff, low prices, simple convenience, or just chance? What exactly do customers expect from your company?

2) Measure customer perception/satisfaction.

Once customers have established a relationship with your company, it is fair to say that they perceive your brand as something from which a certain level of satisfaction will be attained. Now, did you meet or exceed their expectations? Are they truly satisfied with their experience? How will you know for certain unless you have invited your customers to communicate with you?

3) Measure customer intentions.

Will they come again? Will they bring their friends and family? Will they talk about their experience with your brand and if so, what will they say?

The answers to these questions are extremely valuable to your business. This feedback will allow you to see which marketing strategies work (and don't work), which products or services are appealing (or unappealing), what the atmosphere communicates (or fails to communicate), and what the employee-customer experience establishes (or fails to establish).

4) Tell customers the truth; then deliver what you promised.

What if a company developed a slogan that simply offered to fulfill customers' basic needs and expectations? In this scenario, the marketing message conveys what the company can sincerely offer, and the customers (attracted by a truthful message) get what they expect—nothing less, maybe even more. As a result, customers are more likely to return, and the company's economic trend begins to reverse.

5) Aim to give customers more than they expect.

A "totally satisfied" customer is invaluable to your business. This particular customer is more likely to return, to pay premium prices, and to provide free word-of-mouth promotion, effectively increasing your customer base and your revenues at no cost to you.

By now, you can see how the company's economic trend reversal takes place. It becomes logical to spend less in marketing per se, and to invest more in employee-customer relations. This has the effect of improving service delivery, increasing customer satisfaction, and expanding the customer base. This form of "face-to-face" marketing has a more positive impact on the customer and overall business performance.

As a portion of the marketing budget is funneled to the improvement of employee-customer relations, the company might feel the need to tell a story other than the one now experienced and communicated by the customer. This company message is delivered "on-the-spot" and in a compelling manner. The customer now receives much more than what he/she had expected and had been promised.

Translation: the now “totally satisfied” customer spends more, returns frequently, and tells friends and family. Your company image improves and your customer base grows. Operations are simplified in the form of fewer customer complaints, improved employee performance and satisfaction, diminished turnaround, and reduced management workload. Revenues begin to increase as costs drastically decrease.

The fundamental lesson learned is that the most valuable marketing message is not the one concocted at the company’s headquarters or at some remote marketing agency, but the one that is created, believed and effectively delivered by the front-line employees.

In these tough economic times, the strength of your employee-customer relations can mean the difference between whether your business flounders or thrives. Be sure that your company is doing everything it can to fulfill and then exceed the expectations of your most valuable resource: your customers.



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