



Transactions

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Delivering an Unforgettable Customer Experience

What if you could spend less money and time on marketing and promotion? Where could you invest the money instead? Would you benefit by having extra time in your day to spend with the people in your life? What if everyone in your company understood the features and benefits of your company's offering AND the needs of every current and potential client?

You have a gold mine sitting in your current customer database in the form of information, additional sales, and connections to new clients. Your competitive edge lies in your ability to access it while delivering an unforgettable customer experience.

A U.S. Small Business Administration study found that customers stayed with companies where they felt valued. Another study found that a 5 percent reduction in customer attrition can result in a 25 percent to 125 percent increase in sales. Quality business relationships increase your profit through happier customers and employees.

The relationship is the currency in today's rapidly changing, competitive

business climate. By building a series of meaningful transactions, you can create long-term business relationships that turn your clients into your marketing and sales force. It's nice to have friends, but it's priceless to have fans who rave about your company to their friends.

This chapter kicks off the topic of delivering an unforgettable customer experience that enables us to forge a lifelong business relationship with our customers. We spend a lot of time and money getting customers in the door the first time. That investment comes in the form of advertising, sales commissions, and marketing support. It costs five times as much to get a new customer as it does to keep an existing customer. Successful businesses that invest in customer retention activities create customers for life and can reduce the amount of focus on their marketing effort.

The American Management Association says that only 65 percent of customers buy again where they bought before. Further, Ronald C. Goldstein, a professor at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business says that 40 percent of customers leave firms because of poor service. Goldstein says that is why people switch brands and most never tell the company.

Creating loyal customers is a great way to market your business. A *Fortune* magazine survey revealed that a satisfied customer tells nine people. On the other hand, 85 percent of dissatisfied customers tell nine people, but 13 percent of dissatisfied customers tell twenty people.

Companies lose an average of 10 percent of their customers each year. Our customers switch businesses for many reasons. A U.S. Small Business Administration survey revealed why customers leave. Here's the shocker — only 9 percent of customers left a business because of price. Just 14 percent who left were dissatisfied with the product. Over 68 percent of customers left because they perceived that the business' staff didn't care. Ouch!

Paying attention to your customers is more than courtesy and common sense. It can ensure you keep your customers from leaving and taking their business to your competitors.

You know your industry. The next four chapters will give you the tools to help you dig deeper in your current relationships so you can utilize that expertise to improve your success and your bottom line.

CHAPTER 8

Creating Meaningful Customer Dialogue

One afternoon, my phone rang. It was a sales representative for a health insurance company. He obviously took the time to visit my website because he thought I employed a lot of people. Based on that criteria, he determined that I'm his target client. His company provides group insurance, and two or more people in an organization make a group. Without ever talking with me, he opened up his phone conversation based on the assumptions that I employ a bunch of people. I run a professional speaker bureau where I help organizations search out, negotiate with, and hire speakers for conferences and company meetings. The speaker is the product I carry, and I sell their services and programs to my clients. Even though speaker bureaus show all these speakers on their websites, the speakers aren't employees. In fact, I outsource everything and don't currently employ anyone. I thought I was never going to convince him that I didn't employ anyone. He acted like I was lying to him. If he had opened up his cold call with some meaningful conversation, I could have saved him some time.

In the Chapter 4: Leading Meaningful Conversations, you learned how to lead conversations when you are meeting someone new or just getting to know them better. In this chapter, we take it a step further and apply the same principles to building a deeper relationship with our prospective or existing clients. Relationships take time and frequent contact. That requires us to concentrate on learning about the other person and being engaged and interested. They aren't just business contacts — our goal should be to treat them as friends and business partners.

Interviewing customers is a crucial investment in building an unforgettable customer experience. It literally can define your business relationships. By asking a series of meaningful questions, you gather and understand customer wants, needs, expectations, and desires of their heart. People don't always know what they want when they hire you. If you ask the right questions, you can explore the possibilities of how your relationship could develop and evolve.

The beauty of creating meaningful customer dialogue is that you become a consultant instead of a service or product provider. Asking the right questions reduces the time you spend completing their job. It shows the customer how interested you are in them and identifies *other needs* they have beside their *perceived need*. It's really about getting the information you need to lead the relationship forward to something that is mutually beneficial.

Understanding Who Your Customer Is

We're in the business of serving customers. When you think of customers, you probably think of people who buy a product or service. That's true, but we serve many more customers than that. We have two types of customers:

- **External customers** may include people who benefit from our product or service, whether or not they buy it. They are people who are outside our organization. If you work for a company, they may be the people you serve outside your department. For a non-profit organization, they are the needy served by the organization. For a human resources manager, the customer could be a job applicant.
- **Internal customers** are sometimes the forgotten customers. They include people inside our department, family, or non-profit organizations such as:

- People we support
- Supervisors
- Peers and coworkers
- People who support us
- Donors
- Volunteers
- Our spouse, children, or even pets

Get to know your customers better. You probably support people within your company who aren't in your department. Schedule a meeting with

them to find out what needs they have, and see if you are serving them adequately. Find out what changes they see in the business so you can be a partner in their success. When we look at the people we support inside our companies as customers instead of just being fellow employees, it changes the anatomy of the relationship. If your paycheck truly depended on how well *they think* you're supporting them, you bet you'd make sure you exceeded their expectations. I run a company, and my customers vote with future business on how well I'm taking care of their needs. When I lose a client, it's because I didn't assess and serve their needs properly.

Complete the customer identification exercise on the next page. A customer service transaction is an important component of a relationship. As you can see in the exercise, every customer transaction is a give-and-take relationship. For example, if your customer buys a product or service, you need repeat business and payment. If you serve your employees, you also need their loyalty and dedication.

Customer Service Versus an Extraordinary Customer Experience

The key to a great customer experience is knowing what our customers — internal or external — expect. If you really want to know what your customers want, ask them. The biggest mistake in customer service program design is using criteria that we measure ourselves by based on how *WE* define great customer service. If you really want to deliver a great customer experience, focus on what *YOUR CUSTOMERS* want and need.

You've heard of the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. To deliver a great customer experience, you should follow the Platinum Rule: Do unto others as they want to be done unto! It's a humorous approach with a very serious undertone. *Customer service is what our customers think it is.*

Customers have wants and needs. Meet those and you have provided good customer service. However, customers have something else too — desires. They don't always speak the desires of their heart. If you can discover and deliver service that addresses the desires of their heart, you are on your way to creating an exceptional customer experience. Anyone is capable of delivering good customer service. Only a few can deliver an extraordinary customer experience.

Once we know what our customers expect from us, we can redefine how we deliver and measure our results. Once we align what we deliver with what our customers want, we all benefit. Customers reward exceptional customer service many ways, and they often vote with their dollars in the form of budget increases, future sales, and raises. There are different types of rewards

Identifying Your Customers

We all have customers. If you own a company, you have people who buy your products and services. If you work for a company, your customer may be your boss, peers you support in your job, or your employees who report to you. If you run a non-profit organization, your customers may be your donors, volunteers, or the people you help through your organization. If you are a parent or spouse, your customers are your family members and — silly as it sounds — pets if you have them.

Part A. Name three people you serve in your profession.

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Now think about your personal life. Name three people you serve.

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Part B. For each person, write down one need that you fill for him or her.

Professional

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Personal

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

as well. An employee who strives to understand his customers’ desires and serve them well may receive additional responsibility or promotions. Non-profits who understand what their donors desire can benefit too. They retain the donors they have but could get more donors because their existing donors told their friends how happy they were with the organization.

Part C. For each of those people you named in Part A, think of one thing you need from them.

Professional

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Personal

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Part D. Of all of those customers, which is your most important customer? Why is that person your most important customer?

Part E. Name some things for each person that they need that you aren’t currently providing.

Professional

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Personal

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Customer service expectations for an administrative assistant might include arriving on time for work, producing timely reports, maintaining a pleasant attitude, and keeping a neat workspace. If the assistant also made sure his supervisor remembered important family birthdays and suggested gift ideas, he would be on his way to creating an extraordinary customer experience.

Focusing on the customer experience is about serving your customers' unspoken desires of their heart, but it also means addressing their needs and wants even before they have them. If the assistant built a solid business referral network for everything that he needed in his job (like office supply stores, copier companies, or shipping operations), he would make his job easier. However, if his business referral network served the needs of his supervisor as well (such as insurance agents, investment professionals, or home repair professionals) where he never had to spend time searching for those services, he would be on his way to delivering an extraordinary customer experience.

An Unforgettable Customer Experience Starts with Meaningful Dialogue

In Chapter 5: The Importance of Speaking Skills, I mentioned working on a training program that chronicled the twenty-three leadership principles that Sam Walton used to build and lead the Wal-Mart organization before his death in 1992. We interviewed fifty company leaders who had worked with him. They most commonly spoke of his ability to create meaningful dialogue to get ideas to correct problems and implement new ideas.

There was one fascinating phenomenon that we experienced with many of the people who had spent significant time with Sam Walton. The bulk of them were busy running the daily operations of the successful retailer. We wanted to be excellent stewards of the time they'd given us, so we got right down to business. With most of them, they started out by creating rapport and asking us questions — what we did, how long we had been with the company, did we have kids? Even Rob Walton, Wal-Mart Chairman of the Board and oldest son of Sam Walton, wouldn't go any further into the conversation until he got to know us better.

Here is the most valuable lesson in that experience: modeled behavior is easier to teach. Sam Walton probably didn't spend time telling all of those leaders that they should ask a series of questions to create rapport with

people. Instead, he modeled it himself, and it was such an impactful lesson that they adopted the practice.

Meaningful Dialogue Starts with Meaningful Questions

Somewhere along the way, businesses came up with a great theory: people are more likely to do business with friendly businesses. It's a great theory, but it doesn't always translate to practice. It goes back to the Platinum Rule: treating others the way THEY want to be treated.

Many banks have a desk at the front where someone sits and greets the customers as they walk in. When I enter into my local video store, every employee in the building greets me. When you walk into many clothing shops, you'll often be greeted by a salesperson.

First of all, those gestures are nice and they do show customers that someone noticed they walked in. Greeting customers when they enter the building is also a great theft-prevention technique that places people on notice that someone is aware of them — thieves are less likely to steal merchandise or rob you if someone talked with them and made enough eye contact to identify them in a police line-up.

A company policy that requires every employee in the video store to greet customers when they enter does not genuinely create an atmosphere of friendliness. Customers know it's not a genuine response when the activity is automated or scripted. It shouldn't surprise you that customers think that aggressively friendly salespeople are stalking them so they get the commission before any other salesperson gets it. All these techniques are transparently insincere.

I know you've been in a store where the cashier asked you if you found everything okay. What happened when you said, "No, I didn't find everything I came in for." When I've said that, I got these responses:

- "I'm sorry to hear that."
- "That's too bad."
- "I can't do anything about it."

SO WHY DID THE CASHIER ASK IF I FOUND EVERYTHING OKAY? I can answer yes or no, and that can be the end of the conversation. We then spend fifteen minutes standing on opposite sides of the checkout station in awkward silence while the cashier scans my purchases. It's like when

someone asks you how you are as a greeting — not because they care how you are. As the customer, I’m left wondering if the cashier will say anything to the manager about the items that were out of stock.

When people engage in a conversation with someone and they provide some feedback, how does that affect them when they believe no one ever does anything with it? They soon stop giving feedback because they assume no one cares.

Don’t ask questions that are simply a greeting or filler. You’d be better off asking them where they went on vacation over the summer or what kind of pets they have. Ask questions that you can build a conversation with.
MEANINGFUL DIALOGUE IS CREATED THROUGH A SERIES OF MEANINGFUL QUESTIONS.

Here’s the most powerful secret to being genuinely known as a friendly company: engage in meaningful dialogue with your customers. The foundation of every great conversation is a series of open-ended questions — those that can’t simply be answered with a one-word answer.

Closed-ended question:	Can I help you find anything? [No thanks, I’m just looking.]
Open-ended question:	What items have you been shopping for? Have you seen any great sales today?

When cashiers create meaningful dialogue, they are engaging the customer in the process and showing they are interested in them. It builds rapport, and customers are more likely to have a favorite cashier that they line up for every time they visit the store. If you are a salesperson, you want customers to look you up because they have a good relationship with you. They want to spend time with you because you care and make them feel valued. Business owners, sales professionals, trainers, human resources managers, corporate vice presidents, and non-profit volunteers all need to make meaningful conversation. The benefits will reap rewards that will benefit you personally, professionally, financially, and in many more ways.

Face Time and Revealing Questions

The first step in delivering an unforgettable customer experience is to create some face time with your customer. Remember, customers can be internal or external and include people we interact with in other departments or