



executive coach

by Karlin Sloan



Proactive professional

Getting caught in the act of providing better customer service.

THE BIGGEST MISTAKE MANY COMPANIES MAKE IN customer service is making it reactive, rather than proactive. We've all been the customer on the complaining end of the line, saying, "What is this extra charge on my bill?" or "My refrigerator never arrived!"

Proactive customer service has many advantages. First, reacting to problems after they happen is usually more challenging and more expensive than anticipating customer needs and reaching out before anything goes awry. If you already have a good relationship with your clientele, problems won't seem so large, and customers will stay because of their positive experiences up front. Second, proactive customer service reduces costs. If you compare the cost of a well-timed email or phone call to connect with the customer to the cost of responding to hundreds of irritated phone messages, the answer should be crystal clear. Third, proactive customer service can address problems before they start by gathering valuable feedback from your customers in advance of a breakdown.

Who we remember

I know the places that ask me what they can do better are the ones that stay on my mind and the ones I reach out to as a repeat customer. Like many frequent travelers, I have a favorite place to stay, Hotel Monaco. This hotel goes out of its way to be proactive in its relationships with customers, and they're a great example of how businesses can reach out, retain positive customer relationships and ask the right questions about improving their performance. They learn every detail about your likes and dislikes, including what morning newspaper you want, what you order from room service and what kind of pillow you prefer. They have little touches they change to suit their special regular customers, such as magazines about their personal hobbies or interests on the nightstand, and personalized thank-you cards welcoming patrons to their rooms. Each time I stay with them, I fill out a comment card. At the desk, they ask

how my stay was in a way that communicates they actually want to know. When once I had a bad experience with hotel room service, they went out of their way to address my complaint immediately and to remember it when I returned, making sure they followed up. Every time I have a chance to recommend them, I do.

Guidelines for proactive customer service

1. Recognize your most important customers.
2. Don't forget—everyone's an important customer!
3. Start the conversation.
4. Repeat the question.
5. Thank the customer.
6. Don't drop the ball.

Important customers

Who are your most important clients/customers? How do you assess that? First, it's critical to determine who is a loyal repeat customer, who is a great reference and who spends the most with your company. Those folks are keepers! Finding a way to reward loyalty is a great idea. It all starts with a conversation.

Of course, all customers are important. As much as you want to reward loyalty, you don't want to forget that every single person who interacts with your organization is potentially a salesperson for you if they have a positive customer service experience.

As a female business owner, I'm a member of a large listserv in the Chicago area that acts as a discussion board for all sorts of interesting business (and other) issues. There are thousands of members, so information circulates fast. Common postings have to do with new job listings, networking and, of course, referrals. Some of the most memorable postings have to do with customer service experiences, both good and bad.

Here's an example: Starting post: "I'm looking for a good upholsterer for my old couch." Response #1: "I have

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the world's best upholsterer, Upholsterex. Not only did they get my furniture done in eight days, but the whole team is great to work with. Even the movers who picked up the stuff. Here's their number..." Response #2: "Just don't use Upholsterfarm. I can't believe how rude they are, and after I commented to the manager about the woman who set up my initial appointment, he didn't call me back!"

Starting the conversation

How do you start a conversation about what you could do better? The first step is to reach out. One company in New York City sent a box of nuts and bolts to all of their loyal customers, with a note: "You're the nuts and bolts of our business—our customers keep us together!" Included was a survey form that asked the question, "How are we doing?" along with a set of numeric ratings and a return envelope. That mailing was so memorable that customers many years later still comment on it.

The wonder of repetition

The first time you ask, it's a courtesy. The second time you ask, you prove you care. That rule can help as you wonder why you're repeating yourself. Ask how you can improve. Then ask again. Learn how your customers like to receive communication. Do they prefer email or a direct conversation? Would they appreciate never hearing from you until they call? Keep track, and respond in the way that your customer wants. My recent trip to a bike shop was followed by a paper checklist completed by the checkout clerk. He asked me three questions: 1. How did you hear about us? 2. Is there anything you'd like to see in the shop that we don't have? and 3. Would you like to be contacted with specials, events, promotions or our rides newsletter? I was so glad that I had an opportunity to select what type of contact I got that I commented specifically on how happy I was that I could get the rides newsletter without receiving any promotional emails. Great questions.

We all want to be thanked

A thank-you is very simple. It requires little time and effort. Think of the last time someone thanked you for something. What in particular made that thank-you memorable? My guess

is that it was heartfelt, and you knew they meant it. Think about the opportunities you have to thank your key customers. What do they mean to you? What opportunities have they given you through their patronage?

Don't drop the ball

The worst thing you can do with customer feedback is nothing at all. Once you gather the information, your customer needs to feel valued enough to receive a response from you—either by letting them know the impact of their feedback (e.g., with a policy change or product revamp), or just by telling them how great it is to hear something positive, and that you'll be working to maintain the same excellent level of service that inspired their positive feedback.

The most important result of proactive customer service is building customer memories of your company at every turn. Make them good ones!

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