

Seven Relationship-Building Business Strategies

by Barbara Wold

The following article provides information for downtown businesses interested in strengthening their relationship with their customers. These strategies can be especially useful to local independent businesses facing intense competition for major chain and big box retailers on the edge of town.

Q: With so much competition, it's hard for a small business to keep from blending into the background. What can you do to help customers think of you first when they're ready to buy?

A: Successful businesses don't just communicate with prospects and customers for special sales. Today, making your company indispensable is a vital key to marketing success. It's a terrific way to add value, enhance your brand and position against your competition. Here are seven relationship-building strategies that will help you transform your company into a valuable resource:

1. Communicate Frequently

How often do you reach out to customers? Do the bulk of your communications focus on product offers and sales? For best results, it's important to communicate frequently and vary the types of messages you send. Instead of a constant barrage of promotions, sprinkle in helpful newsletters or softer-sell messages. The exact frequency you choose will depend on your industry and even seasonality, but for many types of businesses, it's possible to combine e-mail, direct mail, phone contact and face-to-face communication to keep prospects moving through your sales cycle without burning out on your message.

2. Offer Customer Rewards

Customer loyalty or reward programs work well for many types of businesses, from retail to cruise and travel. The most effective programs offer graduated rewards, so the

more customers spend, the more they earn. This rewards your best, most profitable clients or customers and cuts down on low-value price switchers—customers who switch from program to program to get entry-level rewards. Whenever possible, it is useful to offer in-kind rewards that remind your customers of your company and its products or services.

3. Hold Special Events

The company-sponsored golf outing or event is back. With the renewed interest in retaining and up-selling current customers, company-sponsored special events and promotions are returning to the forefront. Any event that allows you and your staff to interact with your best customers is a good bet, whether it's a springtime golf outing or a customer appreciation evening. Just choose the venue most appropriate for your unique customers and business.



4. Build Two-Way Communication

When it comes to customer relations, "listening" can be every bit as important as "telling." Use every tool and opportunity to create interaction, including asking for feedback through your Web site and e-newsletters, sending customer surveys (online or offline) and providing online message boards or blogs. Customers who know they're "heard" instantly feel a rapport and a relationship with your company. What about a focus group?

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5. Enhance your Customer Service

Do you have a dedicated staff or channel for resolving customer problems quickly and effectively? How about online customer assistance? One of the best ways to add value and stand out from the competition is to have superior customer service. Customers often make choices between parity products and services based on the perceived "customer experience." This is what they can expect to receive in the way of support from your company after a sale is closed. Top-flight customer service on all sales will help you build repeat business, create positive word-of-mouth and increase sales from new customers as a result.

6. Launch Multicultural Programs

It may be time to add a multilingual component to your marketing program. For example, you might offer a Spanish-language translation of your Web site or use ethnic print and broadcast media to reach niche markets. Ethnic audiences will appreciate marketing communications in their own languages. Bilingual customer service will also go a long way toward helping your company build relationships with minority groups.

7. Visit the Trenches

For many entrepreneurs, particularly those selling products and services to other businesses, it's important to go beyond standard sales calls and off-the-shelf marketing tools in order to build relationships with top customers or clients. When was the last time you spent hours, or even a full day, with your customers? There's no better way to really understand the challenges your customers face and the ways you can help meet them than to occasionally get out in the trenches. Try it. You'll find it can be a real eye-opener and a great way to cement lasting relationships.