Use Today's Technology to Improve Customer Contact

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Use Today's Technology To Improve Your Customer Contact

You need to develop a total strategy, ingrained in all the segments of your marketing effort. In other words, you need to gain control of customer contact before and after the first sale is made.

by Doug Swanson

Even though our world is filled with the equipment and resources needed for communication, it can be especially challenging for a business person to stay in touch with customers. It's difficult enough if you're in wholesale, or business-to-business sales. But if you're working at the retail level, tracking and staying in contact with customers is a key factor in determining your business success or failure.

The most valuable tool for keeping up with customers is something most businesses already own — a computer. My dad did business successfully without a computer 15 years ago, but today it's virtually impossible to go without one to keep track of accounts, balances, and billing.

When my dad and I first started working together in his soft water business (back in the early 1970s), we'd go out sales canvassing together and hit 60 doors each morning. In the early years, there would be someone home at more that half the houses we contacted. Today, most women (especially young women who are prime customers of household products) are working outside the home. If you went canvassing today on the same streets my dad and I worked, you'd probably be lucky to find even 10 percent of the houses occupied during the day.

It would be equally difficult today to find people at home in the evening, since many people are on shift work or go to school at night. Then, on the weekends, people leave home to travel and "get away from it all." Add to all this the complications of unlisted telephone numbers, answering machines for call screening and security bars blocking access to gated communities and you have some serious challenges to identifying, selling, and retaining retail customers for your business.

There's no universal plan for efficient, consistent customer contact.
range of specific water treatment equipment, parts, supplies and service that you can. So, eliminate from your inventory any general items not specifically sought after by the people in your market niche. That way, you leave to the retail giants the product areas in which you cannot compete, and emphasize for yourself the product areas where you do have a distinct advantage.

Market your professional expertise

You have invested many years and a lot of money to become a water treatment professional. Use that expertise to your advantage! Do everything you can to solve problems for customers (as opposed to just selling them equipment or supplies). Remember the last time you went into a big chain store and couldn’t find anyone working there who knew anything about the item you wanted to buy? It’s a frustrating feeling — and something your customers should never have to face, because you have the knowledge and experience that is as valuable as the product itself. All you need to do is market it!

If you have people working for you who are not “up to speed” on all your product and service offerings, train them! It will hurt your business if employees cannot answer a customer’s questions or arrange for service on all the major equipment that your business sells.

Sell with service

Make sure that you have a strong commitment to service after the sale. Every time you install equipment in a customer’s home or business, no matter how small the sale is in terms of dollars spent, you should leave a nameplate on the equipment, with your company’s name and telephone number permanently attached. That way the customer can call you when service is needed.

You also need to make a follow-up phone call or personal visit within three days after the installation to make sure everything is working correctly.

It shows the customers you care, even after their check has been cashed. Then, at least annually, you should follow up with a phone call, letter or personal visit to stay in touch with the customer and inquire about any new water treatment needs. This is something most chain stores do not (and often cannot) do. It is one big way you can make your business stand head and shoulders above your retail competitors.

Remember, the biggest hurdle to overcome in acquiring a customer is getting the customer to trust you. Once you have already earned a customer’s trust, it becomes easy to sell to that customer again and again.

Re-sell with returns

One of the key factors in Wal-Mart’s success is the company’s no

Continued on page 70 ▼
hassle return policy. While other retailers make returning an item about as pleasant as the Spanish inquisition, Wal-Mart makes returns easy. No receipt necessary, no huge form to fill out, no embarrassing questions, no hassle. Learn from this, especially if your business sells a lot of parts and supplies over the counter. If you have a customer who is angry over a $9 return, you may lose hundreds of dollars in future sales.

A customer return is a signal that there was insufficient service, either at the time of the sale to the customer or shortly thereafter. If the customer returns the item, it is your opportunity to sell the customer the correct item, or additional products.

Make your schedule fit the customer’s

Finally, you need to make your business schedule fit the schedule of the customers in your market niche. I live in Lawton, Okla., which is home to thousands of U.S. Army infantry and field artillery soldiers at Fort Sill. Many retailers in my community stay open long hours in order to serve a large base of customers who do not work “9 to 5” jobs. In fact, a local community college is currently establishing a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week schedule to assist students who work shift work and cannot attend college during normal business hours.

Whatever your specific line of products or services, you need to be able to contact customers when those customers can be reached. This may mean having to run customer service calls after 6 p.m., or do installations on the weekends. Whatever it takes, you should do it because if you don’t, a competitor certainly will!

Above all, don’t let your business become a shrinking violet. Make sure your company’s name and logo are highly visible in the community. Let people identify with you through your cars and trucks traveling between jobs, your place of business, your letterhead and brochures and through your retail and telephone directory advertising. Local community businesses like yours only get challenged by the mega-retailers when it looks like there is a market to be captured. Don’t give that market up without a fight! And by all means, take advantage of the strategies outlined here to help your business grow, even in the face of “giant” retail competition.

Doug Swanson has 12 years experience in broadcasting journalism and public relations. He is on the faculty at Cameron University in Lawton, Okla., where he teaches mass media and communications courses.

Vice President of the Swanson Group, a research and public relations firm, Swanson got an early start in water conditioning working in his father’s North Hollywood franchise. He was later general manager of a Rayne dealership.

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