

## **For Customer Service, Please Read (Instead of Holding)**

*Paul B. Brown*

Customer service is often considered a cost — something a small business has to do to stay in business.

But done right, customer service can be both an effective and profitable marketing strategy.

Turning a one-time buyer into a lifetime customer may lead to a variety of things happening, all of them good, including these:

1. Revenue climbs because customers come back and buy from you again.
2. If customers are buying from you, your company is getting the business instead of someone else.
3. Marketing costs decrease because you need to spend less money to attract new customers. That increases profit margins.
4. Repeat customers are slightly less price sensitive. They are unlikely to go elsewhere for a tiny discount, since you have already proven your worth to them.
5. They will be predisposed to try a new offering from you, if you have done a good job with the old one you sold them.

**IN THE BEGINNING** Perhaps the best way of figuring out how to provide good customer service is to start with a definition.

Writing on [sbinfocanada.about.com](http://sbinfocanada.about.com), which offers resources for small business owners, Doug Howardell of ACA Group, an alliance of consultants, says his group defines customer service as “the ability of an organization to constantly and consistently give the customer what they want and need.”

There are two interesting things to note about that definition.

First, it is the customer who is deciding what is good service, not the organization providing it.

Second, it extends to cover areas “that do not come in direct contact with the customer at all,” he says. “Manufacturing, purchasing and quality control may never talk to the end user of our products, yet they are vital in meeting the customer’s needs. If we deliver an expensive product that doesn’t work and we deliver it late, that affects customer service just as much as a rude salesperson. The entire enterprise must pull together to provide excellent customer service.”

**THE GOLDEN RULE** Perhaps the simplest way to consistently provide good customer service is also the best, argues Darlene Zagata.

Writing on [associatedcontent.com](http://associatedcontent.com), an online publisher, she suggests simply following the golden rule.

“It really helps to put yourself in the customer’s position,” she says. “How would you feel if you were that person? Wouldn’t you appreciate someone who speaks to you cordially and takes a genuine interest in your problem? You know you would, so do the same for them.”

**SOME SPECIFICS** AllBusiness.com, an online media and e-commerce company, offers specific suggestions when it comes to providing better customer service. These are among the ideas:

¶ Stay in touch (after getting your customer's permission to do so) and "focus all these communications on letting customers know that you can solve their problems and meet their needs."

¶ Send thank you notes after major purchases.

¶ "Store collective wisdom. One of the most important customer strategies is to set up a system for responding to customer inquiries or complaints. The last thing you want is for your employees to provide inaccurate information to your customers. With that in mind, staffers need to know exactly where to look for answers. While it's natural for new employees to rely on the wisdom of more experienced ones, you don't want all that wisdom to walk out the door when someone quits. Develop a 'knowledge base'; that is, a store of information with answers to common questions, methods for solving problems and standards for resolving disputes. Your knowledge base can be as simple as a notebook where staff members or the store manager jots notes; a searchable text file on a computer; or a database."

LAST CALL When you call asking for help, isn't the recorded message, "For customer service, please hold," a wonderful example of terrible service?

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