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Ten Sure-Fire Ways to Turn Customers into Brand Enthusiasts

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Loyalty. What creates it? How can you sustain it? Is there a ‘secret sauce’ that helps you transform a run-of-the-mill customer into a wildly enthusiastic devotee? What motivates a consumer to drive past 25 restaurants to get to their favorite one? Why does every piece of clothing I’m wearing have a Nordstrom label? What in the world causes Harley Davidson loyalists to love a brand name so much that they will tattoo it on their body? I’m not sure there is a single answer. But I know some things that will help. Here are ten sure-fire ways to help turn customers into brand enthusiasts:

(1) Know my dog’s name.

Loyalty is all about the emotional connection. I want to know that you care about me and my business. If all I am is another greenback, then I’ll take my greenbacks elsewhere. So, get to know me. For example, how many times do I have to deal with you, before you figure out that I am a “regular” in your store? Why, when I call my bank do I have to give my address over and over – don’t they have caller ID? Why “know my dog’s name?” Because, if you care enough to know about my dog, then you’ll surely have learned about the rest of my needs.

(2) Make sure that your steak matches your sizzle.

When you advertise, you are making promises to customers. Make sure you are prepared to keep those promises. If you can’t walk the walk, don’t talk the talk. Best-in-class companies don’t succumb to the temptation to stretch the truth in their sales or marketing. Rather than promising the moon, just be prepared to deliver the telescope.

(3) Make it easy to do business with you: sell the way I want to buy.

When was the last time you had a service experience and you walked away saying to yourself, “Now, that was easier than I thought it was going to be!” When I was at Marriott, I made it our number one marketing rule to sell the way that customers want to buy. For example, customers began asking to buy hotel rooms online. At that time, the internet was fledgling. Travel agents and toll-free phone calls were the primary methods for reserving a hotel room. Back then, no one could understand why anyone would ever want to buy something as personal as a hotel room electronically. Now, the bulk of hotel reservations are made online. The best way I know to evaluate yourself in this area is to question if you are following the platinum rule of service, “Do unto others as they would have done unto them.”

(4) Do the hustle: urgency and responsiveness!

Do you want my business? How can I tell? Urgency and responsiveness are the hallmarks of service. How long will it take for you to answer my question? Are you engaged – or are you simply moseying along? Think about the last line you were in – bank, hotel, DMV, airport security, etc. How does it make you feel when two employees are chatting idly while you wait for them? “Urgency” tells me that you care and shows me in a tangible way that you really want my business.

(5) Return my emails and phone calls, will ya?

Wanna stand out? Just answer your flippin' phone. These days, that'll make you a star. Here's an example. If you get my answering machine today, you will hear the following message, "Please leave a message, and I will return your call today." I learned this from Lonnie Mayne, my fellow worker. And he doesn't just say he'll call you back, he calls you back – today! I really believe that if you will do something as simple as return my call, or answer my email you will stand out among the crowd.

(6) No crap on returns: just take it back, no questions asked!

What an indignity having to prove that I actually bought an item from you – even though it's got your private-label brand name all over it. Don't make your returns process equal my distaste for the government when I stand in line for hours to register my car. One day, someone from your accounting department is going to come to your office and say, "Well, I've run the numbers, and if we tightened up our returns policy, we will make X% more." Here's what you do... smile... and thank them for their idea... and escort them out of your office. Many companies use complex returns policies to try and save a nickel here or there. Talk about penny-wise and pound foolish. I like to think of people who dream up this kind of policy as working in the "Department of Sales Prevention." Instead, make it simple, smooth, and easy. Your customers will love you for it.

(7) Don't beat up your employees.

Don't beat up your employees, they may take it out on the customer. Your employees are your company. They are an extension of your brand and brand promise. Treat them with respect and they will take better care of your customers. 'Nuff said.

(8) Don't try to trick me on price.

Who invented the concept of selling gasoline at prices that end with 9/10ths of a cent? Come on! Are consumers really morons? I don't think so. Same thing goes for, "Free. You just pay shipping and handling." Or, trying to sneak in some additional fees in the fine print. Here's my rule: never, never, never risk the long-term relationship you might develop with a customer by trying to take advantage of him today. This always reminds me of my favorite law firm name: Dewey, Cheatum, and Howe! Don't hire them or their shady practices.

(9) Ask me what I think about you.

Ask. Listen. Respond. Real-time customer feedback is no longer a "nice-to-have," it is a best practice. And forget antiquated comment cards – you need to know immediately what your customers are experiencing. Some companies like to use mystery shoppers to ensure practices and policies are being followed. This can be helpful. But by far the most important, and the most cost effective measurement is knowing how actual customers feel about your company and your brand. You've got to give every customer the opportunity to respond to a survey invitation. Then, if they are willing to share honest feelings with you, you need to respond to their feedback by improving in areas of weakness and emulating areas of strength.

(10) Just deliver: consistency beats snazzy in the long run.

I've always been impressed with dependability and consistency. Just the basics – you know, a clean hotel room, a rental car that works, an accurate order, a reasonable wait time. I don't need or usually even want all the fru-fru extras – just make sure that the core things are done completely right. Here's an interesting way to verify that this approach pays off. Think about the last 5-10 conversations you've had about a hotel. How many of those conversations were about a fabulous experience, versus how many were about a negative experience? I'd guess, unscientifically, that 80% of comments I hear about hotels are negative. If that is the case, it just adds credence to my belief that perhaps the only thing a good hotel needs to win in the long run is to simply deliver – i.e. stay off the black list. It's something to think about, isn't it?

Want to turn your customers into your wildest fans? Follow these ten rules and you'll be well on your way.

This is how I see it.

About Richard D. Hanks and Mindshare

Richard D. Hanks is the President of **Mindshare Technologies**, the leading provider of real-time, automated customer and employee feedback solutions. His experience spans multiple industries and disciplines, including many years as an adjunct professor at Cornell. He is a frequent teacher/speaker at trade, academic, and professional gatherings, and the author of "[Delivering and Measuring Customer Service](#)." Mindshare's business monitoring tools help companies improve operational excellence and minimize customer attrition through personal customer involvement. Mindshare's proprietary survey technology captures the voice of the customer in real-time and immediately transforms it into actionable intelligence through powerful and incisive enterprise reporting. As a hosted system, Mindshare is affordable and flexible, with surveys and reports tailored to fit a company's individual needs. For more information please visit: www.mshare.net & www.duffroad.com. To reach Rich directly, contact him at rhanks@mshare.net or (801) 263-2333.