

Customers Are Your Business

Ask most any member of the American Angus Association what their business is and they'll likely tell you they breed registered Angus. We are proud to be in the "cattle business." And that's good.

But marketing experts will tell you that the most successful business people believe and operate on the principle that, "The customer is our business." Many a cattle breeder will proudly say, "I breed the kind of cattle that I like." Maybe so, but the happiest cattle breeders breed the kind of cattle that customers like. The two can be one and the same. Still, the attitude we have about our business affects the way we operate.

The head of IBM, when it grew into the world's largest computer company, operated on the principle that marketing is not selling what you produce, but rather producing what the consumer wants. After he retired, the company concluded that customers would want large mainframe computers in the future and they deemphasized the personal computer business. As it turned out, the future was more in smaller "PC" type equipment. The employee layoffs and the decline in IBM stock testified to the danger of misjudging the market.

The key to becoming customer oriented is to develop customer loyalty, and to constantly monitor their needs and wants, as you adjust production accordingly. The customer is not always right, even the customer knows this. But he or she is always the one who allows you to pay your bills, and hopefully put a little extra in the bank. That's why their satisfaction and loyalty are so important.

Most of us hate people who complain. But complaining customers are important because they give you a chance to set things straight and keep their business. It's the customer who complains to someone other than you who is the big problem. These dissatisfied customers will tell tens of other people about how unhappy they are with you.

The customer who complains to you first and gets a satisfactory solution, will, on the other hand, often tell potential customers how fair you are and how much they like you and your service. Surveys show that from 50 to 70 percent of complaining customers can be kept as customers if their complaint is resolved satisfactorily.

So when a customer complains, take them seriously, ask questions, evaluate their needs, offer them a set of possible solutions, and explain exactly how you can resolve their problem.

Loyal customers are not created by chance, says Patricia Fry, a writer for *Communication Briefings*. Successful business people, she contends, know the health of their business depends upon loyal customers. Fry recommends a four-pronged approach to creating loyal customers:

1 Acknowledge the customer as a person — an individual with a name, a life, needs and concerns.

2 Learn everything you can about each of your customers.



3 Ask what each customer wants from you.

4 Make it easy to do business with you.

She also recommends you establish a line of communication with customers that allows you to listen carefully to them. You will discover both positive and negative things about the way you do business. It is important, Fry concludes, to ask customers what they need, rather than telling them what you can do for them.

Fry recommends marketers conduct both written and telephone surveys of customers. This allows you to not only discover potential problems but to get their ideas about the future.

"Never, never assume you have arrived," she says. "You must keep listening to the voice of the public and continually adjust to facilitate their needs."

Indeed, we are in the cattle business. But customers ARE our business.


by Keith Evans, Director of Communications and Public Relations