

THE ART OF THE RECOVERY

By Troy Harrison

How strong are your customer relationships? If you're like most business owners, your immediate response is to say, "We have GREAT customer relationships! Our customers love us, and truly value our services." Do they? Before we dive into the meat of this article, let's first look at the three levels of customer relationships:

Level One – The Occasional Buyer: The Occasional Buyer doesn't have a "relationship" with you. Every purchase is a new buying process, and if you offer the best value on that particular buying process, you get the business – and if not, your competitors do. And if you make a mistake servicing them, it will be a good long while before you get another shot.

Level Two – The Habitual Buyer: The Habitual Buyer buys pretty much everything from you, because they buy from you. In other words, they don't really know why, and they don't understand much about your company, but when they need what you sell, it's your business card they pull out. The commonality between the Occasional and Habitual Buyers is that one mistake can cost you their business. Again, you don't really have a "relationship" with them.

Level Three – The Loyal Customer: The Loyal Customer also buys pretty much everything from you, but they know why. They understand and can articulate your value nearly as well as you can, and are happy to evangelize for you to their counterparts. Here's the key difference between the other two levels and this one – your relationship with them can survive occasional mistakes.

Here's the truth: We all make mistakes. Every salesperson, every company, every service department, every production plant – you, and I, all mess up from time to time. What separates the truly successful companies, and the truly good customer relationships, is their ability to **recover** from screw-ups. If you handle the customer correctly when he's angry and dissatisfied, you can actually lay the groundwork for a stronger relationship than you had before. Here are the five keys to a successful recovery:

One: Understand. When a customer calls in and something is going wrong, there's a great chance that they will be on their worst behavior. You have to understand and allow for that. Some of what the customer says will be substantive and relate directly to the problem at hand, and some of it is simply venting. The best strategy is to let the customer vent, while picking through the words to find the root of the problem. While you're at it, show understanding for how this failure on your company's part has affected the customer personally. Say you're sorry – and really mean it.

Two: Fall On Your Sword. When something goes wrong, it's a natural impulse to look for someone to blame. It's even more natural to look for someone ELSE to blame. If you want to really compound your customer's dissatisfaction, blame "that darned service department" or "the people in manufacturing." Guess what? Your customer is upset at ABC Company, and doesn't give the slightest rip which department is messing with his world. He just knows that he cuts the checks to ABC Company and

expects ABC Company to fix it. And, at the moment, YOU are ABC Company. Forget throwing someone else under the bus, and get busy fixing the problem.

Three: Find Some Solutions, Fast. Usually, you can find or devise a solution to the problem fairly quickly. Sometimes, however, you must rely on people outside your company (for instance, if you're a distributor and you have to talk to a manufacturer). Don't be afraid to be the squeaky wheel that needs the grease if you're in that situation. Your customer is counting on you. Most importantly, **do not leave your customer hanging.** What your customer wants most from you is comfort – comfort that their problem is in good hands with someone who cares. Forget to follow up and keep your customer in the loop, and they think YOU don't care. When in doubt, follow up – even if it's to tell them you don't have an answer yet.

Four: Follow Up. Too many salespeople think the problem is "solved" when the SALESPERSON says it's solved. Nonsense. The problem is solved when the CUSTOMER says it's solved, and not until then. Follow up and confirm their satisfaction, the same way you confirm that an objection is handled when you're selling the business.

Five: Make It Up To Them. Truly successful recovery involves a token of appreciation. Your customer needs to know and remember that they weren't a hassle to you; that you are truly sorry that the problem happened and that you're determined to make it right with them. Small tokens of appreciation go a long way here. Gift cards, hats, or other sincere and valued gifts will remind the customer that you value the relationship.

Recovering from adversity in sales is as much about being willing to recognize the adversity as it is working to fix it. Too many salespeople avoid problems, and they are left with angry, upset customers. Do it right and you might be able to strengthen the relationship. Do it wrong, and you're easy prey for your competitors.

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