



Customer Service - Smaller is Better

By Score National Headquarters

When it comes to providing value to customers, size isn't everything—personalized service is.

This important fact can help distinguish small “mom and pop” businesses from big box chain stores. It gives small businesses a powerful competitive edge in an age when more consumers expect a high level of service and responsiveness.

Your position at the “front lines” of your business gives you direct access to your customers’ needs, attitudes, and opinions. You know the kinds of products or services they want, when they want them, and how best to deliver them.

To gain these valuable insights, you need to proactively assess what you do and should be doing to keep customers coming back, rather than tempting them to try the “big store” down the street.

Start by putting yourself in your customers’ place. How would you like to be treated if you were a first-time customer or a “regular?” Also consider conveniences. What can you do to make it easier to find items and check out, rather than having to navigate a big-box store’s aisles and cashier lines?

Also visit other stores and service centers, including those unrelated to your business. See what they do that you find appealing, and adapt those practices to enhance your business’s customer experience. Similarly, watch for aspects you don’t like, but be sure to understand the reasons behind problems or poor service, such as understaffing and limited inventory. This will help prevent similar problems from arising in your business.

How you connect with customers by phone or email will also help differentiate your small business from the sometimes bureaucratic nature of big-box chains. Answer calls promptly and with a friendly greeting. Avoid putting callers on hold for longer than a minute; take a message and respond as soon as possible. If you use an automated answering system, your customer service line should be one of the first options.

Although it may be impractical to handle email inquiries as they arrive, don’t let them sit for too long. Some email systems automatically generate a response to acknowledge the message. Make sure the text is upbeat and friendly—again, the kind of message you’d want to receive. A promise to respond within 24 hours may not be enough. Designate certain times during the day to handle email queries, or assign the responsibility to an employee.

The best tactic for gaining a competitive edge is to contact America’s free and confidential source of small business mentoring and coaching. SCORE is a nonprofit association of more than 12,000 business experts who volunteer as mentors. SCORE offers free mentoring and low-cost workshops nationwide.

If you would like FREE business counseling, please contact the Lynn Area Chamber of Commerce staff at 781-592-2900 or info@LynnAreaChamber.com