

ROLL UP YOUR SLEEVES AND BECOME RELEVANT TO YOUR CUSTOMERS

First the bad news. You aren't going to succeed through manufacturing, distribution or information power – those areas of expertise have all been commoditized.

If you want to be successful today, you'll have to roll up your sleeves and do the hard work of building your customer experience. Don't let yourself become irrelevant to your customers – as is sure to happen if you fail to take proactive steps.

Now here's the good news. There's a direct connection between the excellence of your customer service and the money that isn't dribbling through the floorboards because you haven't invested in cultivating customer service skills throughout your workforce.

In today's fiercely competitive economy it's fatal to sit around and hope that the next big thing will work its magic and save your bacon. No gadget can replace an outstanding service culture.

To start getting your customer service on track, do a little self-assessment to help you understand where you are and where you want to be.

Keep in mind, excellent customer service needs to be tailored to the nature of your business. Customer service at Costco, where customers push giant carts through huge aisles stacked high with value-priced products, is very different from an Apple store with its much smaller selection of pricey products and expert assistance. Costco's strategy is to be a cost leader, while Apple's is focused on innovation.

THREE KEYS TO KEEP IN MIND:

- **Know your customer.** Studying your customer's purchase and support history will help you solve their problems and identify sales opportunities. In the worst case, few of your employees are leveraging your existing CRM technology, and none are calling customers by their name, even though it's right there in front of them.
- **Speed.** Taking too long to resolve problems leads to customer frustration. The shorter the time to resolution, the happier the customer, and the more likely they'll spread the word.
- **Personalize the experience.** Customers love a convenient, personalized response to their problems and questions. If you're just handing out generic information, they'll be more likely to become your frustrated ex-customers.

IF YOU SAY YOU'LL DO IT, DO IT!

Failing to deliver on your promises will severely damage your long-term business prospects.

Focus, focus, focus on your customers. Every business, small or large, should understand the skills their customer-facing employees need to master to foster long-term positive relationships. Put yourself in the customer's shoes: help them in the ways you would like to be helped. Give them amazing customer experiences and encourage them to think like partners. I've said it before – the organizational chart on your wall should have the customer at the top.

MARKETING BRINGS THE CUSTOMERS IN.

Customer service brings them back. Your customer service strategy must be focused on delivering processes, experiences, and intangibles, instead of merely physical goods and transactions. Consider:

- Repeat customers spend 33% more than new customers.
- Referrals by repeat customers are 107% greater than referrals by new customers.

The best companies have mission statements that are all about customer service.

- Disney: "To make people happy."
- Boeing: "To push the leading edge of aviation, taking huge challenges doing what others cannot do."
- 3M: "To solve unsolved problems innovatively."

Top companies like Southwest Airlines, Apple, and Amazon have known for years that great customer service doesn't cost.... it pays!

RO

John Tschohl—described by Time and Entrepreneur magazines as a customer service guru and service strategist—is founder and president of the Service Quality Institute, which has developed more than 26 customer service training programs. John has authored several books on customer service, including Moving Up, and has just released the 10th edition of Achieving Excellence Through Customer Service. John@servicequality.com or www.customer-service.com.

