Seven Steps on How to Survive the COVID-19 Sales Downturn

BY JOHN TSCHOHL

Customer service in the United States has reached a new low. Frankly, it is getting worse each week. You'd think with all the closed businesses, as a result of the pandemic, that the companies that are struggling would be so much more aware of their customer service. The problem is almost all CEOs believe they provide great service, and almost everyone thinks it is awful. When top management does not see any problems with their level of customer service, they face a major problem.
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My experience in the past is too many employees lie to cover up lousy service. I rarely trust what an employee tells me. If you’re calling a company, most use software called IVR that often says, “We really value your business and we will be with you shortly.” When in reality they should say “We are very busy because we do not have enough employees to answer the phone and we feel that your time is not valuable.”

The first time I was in the former Soviet Union more than 40 years ago the attitude was, “You should be grateful that we are allowing you to buy from us.” This is the attitude of most U.S. firms today because of COVID-19 and frankly of companies around the world.

Many employees are very rude, and process driven. They say, “Put on your mask,” instead of saying “Good morning, do you have a mask, or do we need to give you one”? There are customers that refuse, and employees need to know how to handle an angry customer. Attitude, tone of voice and words matter.

Very few employees have ever been trained on customer service and those that have were probably trained several years ago. The most important person in every company is the front-line employee. These individuals are 99 percent of the face of your organization. Rarely will a customer see the CEO or top management. Front-line employees are the least trained, least valued, and least paid. They are, however, the most important assets to your success.

The good news is you can be relentless and run circles around your competition with awesome customer service even in tough times — that’s most important.

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Make sure all employees are empowered to make fast decisions in favor of the customer.

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Here Are Seven Steps You Can Use

1. Become relentless with superior customer service. Good customer service does not get you into the game. Only awesome customer service counts.

2. Train all your employees now on customer service. Keep it fresh — something new every four months. Everyone in the world knows customer service is important. It does not just happen. Most employees and companies have no idea how ineffective they are.

3. Make sure everyone in leadership positions is trained on how to manage a customer-driven culture. Few employees will stray far from the edicts of management. Not enough managers know they are in customer service.

4. Eliminate crazy stupid rules that upset the customer, slow orders and discourage customers from buying and coming back. Amazon is the master of making it easy to buy. Employees need to be aware of the workplace and community rules and policies, especially during these trying times. Customers want convenience and the majority will take notice of your intentions to keep them and others safe.

5. Master service recovery. When something goes wrong use the steps we teach in “Loyal for Life.”
   - Act quickly.
   - Take responsibility.
   - Be empowered.
   - Compensate.

6. Make sure all employees are empowered to make fast decisions in favor of the customer. It typically takes two miracles at one time to get a front-line employee to spend $10 in favor of a customer. It is impossible to be a service leader without empowerment. Of all the skills I teach this is the most difficult skill to get employees to use. They believe they will be fired or forced to pay for what they give away. All employees must be trained on empowerment.

7. In the United States most firms love and worship customer satisfaction surveys. Few people respond. When they do respond, nothing happens. I suggest they take the money set aside for conducting surveys and invest it training all employees on customer service.