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6 ways to build better customer relationships

Want a surefire way to make your business perform better? Give your customers a reason to form an emotional connection with your company.

Good customer relationships are based on customer experience—what it's like for people to do business with you. According to BDC Client Experience Manager Chris Palin, that experience is all about how you exceed customers' expectations.

"Research shows that just 'satisfying' customers isn't enough to guarantee they'll come back," says Palin. "You need to go above and beyond. That's true whether you run a coffee shop where regulars want to feel like a part of the family or an auto-parts company whose customers demand high quality and responsive service."

So how do you exceed expectations? Here are six tips Palin offers to get you started.

1. Understand what your customers value

To find out what your customers value, always listen to what they say and how they say it—and adjust your approach to match their expectations.

Some people will want a lot of personal contact with your business. Others may not be interested in getting too much attention: They just want to call you up, place an order and get on with their day. Some will be very price-conscious while others will be looking for all the bells and whistles. Do your best to keep listening!

2. Show you genuinely care

As a general rule, people want to connect beyond the professional level. That's why it pays off to be friendly and personal. Find out what you have in common with customers and engage on that subject; follow up on key details; ask about their kids or wish them a happy birthday on the day.

Some people naturally retain those kinds of details but if you don't, just write them down in your contact list. The key is to always be authentic. "Customers can tell when you aren't being genuine," Palin says. "If being a 'people person' isn't your strong suit, think about hiring someone who is."

3. Adapt to their pace

If a customer picks up the phone and is clearly in a hurry, don't slow them down with small talk and pleasantries. But if a customer calls and wants to chat, make sure you don't rush them off the phone.

4. Let your brand be your guide

Your branding and marketing make a promise about customer experience and your organization as a whole—and it's essential to deliver on that. If you claim you're always there for customers but people can't get beyond your voicemail when they call you, then you've failed to meet your promise.

The promises you need to keep are closely related to your organization's unique value proposition. Think of a membership-based wholesale retailer versus a boutique, high-end technology shop. While the [customer experience](#) could not be any more different—a giant warehouse versus personal, attentive service—both are delivering exactly what their customers expect to receive.

Make sure all your customer-facing employees are on the same page. "Even if they have experience from somewhere else, they can't approach their job the same way," Palin says. "They have to reflect what your organization stands for."

5. Model the behaviour you want to see

The way you treat your employees shows them how they're supposed to treat your customers. If you're always trying to cut costs, your employees may assume they shouldn't be offering discounts or adding value in other ways, which can go a long way toward exceeding customer expectations.

6. Remember that relationships are built over time

Palin says that while it's important to go above and beyond, "You don't need to hit a home run with every conversation."

He notes that some companies use [customer relationship management \(CRM\) software](#) to help manage their relationships over time. While these can be helpful, especially in larger businesses with formal customer relationship programs, they aren't necessary to deliver exceptional customer experiences.

"The most important thing is to be conscious of the experience you're delivering, and to deliver it consistently," says Palin.