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The best way to foul up is not following up

There is a poster hanging in one of my company's sales offices which reads:

"Don't worry about your customers...if you don't give them great customer service, your competition will!" This has never been more true than it is in today's hyper-competitive business environment. In every market, business owners can select from a wide range of electronic and print media to promote their business. We may hate to admit it, but often our competitors offer a good product at reasonable rates. In these situations, our only competitive edge is our willingness to deliver extraordinary customer service. The three keys to delivering this level of service are:

1. Integrity—the sales person does exactly what they promised to do.
2. Empathy—the sales person demonstrates concern and respect for the advertiser.
3. Performance—the sales person delivers the “goods.” The customer's advertising appears where and when it is supposed to appear and it looks the way it is supposed to look and says what it is supposed to say.

When buyers are polled about the performance of the sales people calling on them, their number one complaint is consistently poor follow-up. Put simply, the key to great customer service is great follow-up. To be successful a sales person must set up a system to organize their activities and ensure that they do not inadvertently miss an opportunity to deliver the service their clients deserve. Systematic follow-up allows a rep to maintain their integrity by keeping track of their promises. It allows them to show their respect for the advertiser by addressing their concerns in a timely manner. Finally, disciplined follow-up improves their performance by nipping many potential problems in the bud.

Before you can do what you said you would do, you have to remember what you said

There is a Chinese proverb that reads, “The palest ink lasts longer than the best memory.” This was good advice in ancient times, but is even more valuable in the hectic times we find ourselves living in. We are caught up in an endless cycle of meetings, e-mails, phone calls and text messages. We often receive several messages at the same time. This makes letting a commitment fall through the cracks far too easy,

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but “I was busy” is never an acceptable excuse for letting a customer down. Taking good notes is the crucial first step to following up on your commitments. Simply jotting something down is not enough; your notes must be organized and easily accessible. A disciplined and systematic approach to note taking is crucial to successful follow-up. The exact system you set up is a matter of personal choice. I set up my personal system long before the advent of smart phones and other portable technologies, so it is paper based. When speaking to a customer or other contact I immediately reach for a notepad. When I make any promise or commitment I write it down and draw a star in the left hand margin of the page. This distinguishes my commitments from the balance of the information I collect. After concluding the conversation, I transfer these “action items” to a pocket memo book which serves as my “to do” list. I keep this book with me at all times and consult it when I have a free moment to remind me to make a call or send an e-mail. At the end of the day I update my “book,” consolidating the information and tearing out finished pages. This method requires discipline: discipline to write down my commitments, discipline to organize my commitments on a “to do” list and most important, the discipline to address the items on it. While this is a lot of work, I find that by consistently following these steps I am able to fulfill all of my promises. I am sure that using Microsoft Outlook or another contact management system could accomplish the same objectives more efficiently, but this system works quite well for me.

For long term commitments I use a tickler file. I keep a “1 to 31” file and a January through December file. The file system is a good supplement to my calendar. The advantage of the file is that it organizes the documents related to a task so that I can find them when they are needed. This is useful when a customer tells me they want to run a holiday ad or that they have an anniversary coming up etc. This file allows me to follow-up on commitments made as far as a year in advance.

It takes a village to deliver great customer service

It takes a lot of people to produce a paper. The sales person works with the customer to collect their information and ascertain their objectives, they then work with a graphic artist to design an ad, with the production staff to schedule it and with the accounting department to bill the customer. All of these people have to do their parts for the ad to run properly, but it is the salesperson who will be hurt most if anyone fails to do their part. This is why it is crucial that we set up a system to track the commitments others make to us as well as the commitments we personally make. Along with my “to do”

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list, I keep a pending list. This lists all of the promises others have made to me. If a customer promises to get me copy for an ad by deadline, I can call them to remind them, diplomatically of course. If I am expecting a proof from an artist; my list will not let me forget that it is due. As the primary contact person for the account, the sales person will get the blame if anything goes wrong or if anyone drops the ball on an account's advertising. Saying "so and so failed to do their job" is never an acceptable excuse and is unlikely to satisfy the customer. Setting up a system to track our "second hand" commitments to the customer is a key component of delivering total customer service. Again, the precise method of tracking this information is much less important than having some means to do so.

Few people outside our business understand how complex an undertaking publishing a paper really is. There are many tasks which must be completed perfectly to move an ad from conception to getting it in the hands of the reader. This complexity means that there are many points when something can go wrong, so publishers have established many checks to ensure everything is done properly. These systems are only useful if they are actually used. Sales people who submit ads early enough to get a proof and who carefully review them, avoid many unpleasant conversations with their customers when the paper hits the street. Reviewing advertiser lists and page proofs is time consuming, but religiously checking our work ensures that a customer's ad will run correctly in the right place at the right time.

Going the extra mile

Living up to a customer's expectations is delivering good customer service. To provide GREAT customer service requires going beyond a customer's expectations. Anything you can do to pleasantly surprise a customer will strengthen your relationship with them and help to keep the competition at bay. One of the simplest and easiest ways a sales person can do this is to send the customer an occasional hand written thank you note in the mail. Less than 5% of the items handled by the U.S.P.S are hand written correspondence, so receiving a note in the mail is a memorable and very pleasant experience for your customers.

In today's business environment, information is one of the most valuable things you can provide to your advertisers. I subscribe to a number of online newsletters from organizations like Advertising Age and other media magazines. I scan these for information which might be interesting to my clients. A quick e-mail takes very little time to send and is a great way to show the customer that you are thinking about them

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and that you want them to succeed. I also share pertinent research on their business and ads from other people in their business. One of the best ways to reinforce your bonds with a customer is to provide them with leads. Introducing a customer to new clients is a way to provide value to both parties involved.

Breaking Murphy's Law

Author and scientist Jared Diamond has identified "Constructive Paranoia" as a crucial survival skill for the primitive tribal people he studies in his work. He believes that this is also a crucial behavior for survival in the increasingly complex modern world. Constructively paranoid people don't leave anything to chance. They check and double check their own work, they make sure others do what they promised and that they do it properly, they know the process and the points where problems can occur. Constructive paranoids are not pessimistic, they are proactive optimists. They expect things to turn out well because they take control of every step in the process. Great reps know that their most valuable assets are the relationships they have with their customers. They make nurturing these relationships their top priority and leave nothing to chance. They keep track of their commitments and the commitments of others to make sure that their customers never have a reason to doubt their sincerity or their ability. In a competitive business environment failing to follow-up is the surest way to foul-up.

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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