



Winning Them Back

How to regain lost business with customers

by: Troy Harrison, Troy Harrison & Associates

How strong are your relationships with your customers and, particularly, your top customers? When I work with my clients, I always like to ask how strong their customer relationships are. I usually hear: “Our customers love us,” or words to that effect. “Great,” I say. Then I ask the most important question: “What percentage of your customer base would allow you one big mistake in your service and continue doing business with you?” Usually, the room gets very quiet.

The room gets quiet because when I ask that question, people begin imagining that scenario. That is what I would like you to do right now. Think about any of your top 10 customers. You have been doing a great job for them — maybe for years. It has been a while since you have made a major mistake. Now imagine that you have made a big one — the kind of mistake that makes it all the way to the decision-maker level. Can your relationship withstand that mistake?

Too many in sales do not really understand the nature of customer relationships. Just because someone buys from you does not mean that you have a genuine, bankable relationship with that customer. Here are my three levels of customer relationships:

(1) The Occasional Buyer — The Occasional Buyer does spend money with you, but he (or she) does not really identify with you. Every purchase is a new buying process, your offer is weighed against competitive offers and whoever makes the best offer at that given time gets the business. Make a mistake and you might get eliminated from the list — or at least get demoted.

(2) The Habitual Buyer — The Habitual Buyer is a deceptive relationship. As the name suggests, he buys from you (all the time or nearly all the time) out of habit, not necessarily out of any particular identification or affinity with you. He buys from you because he buys from you, but there is no loyalty there. Make a mistake and he will break the habit.

(3) The Loyal Customer — This is what we all want. Not only does the Loyal Customer buy from you, he knows why, can articulate what you do for him and will evangelize for you to other potential customers. And more to the point of this article — one mistake does not kill the relationship.

Here is the truth: If you are only one mistake away from losing his business at any given time, your relationship with your customer is not very strong. A strong relationship will withstand a service issue — even a big one. The strongest will withstand multiple issues. If a lot of your customers are one mistake away, do not feel bad. Your competitor is probably in the same



situation. We have talked before about how to build stronger relationships, so let’s talk about how to win back lost business.

You must understand that your biggest obstacle in regaining a lost customer is fear — yours and theirs. You fear going back to the customer because you do not want to be rejected again. Your customer fears doing business with you because he does not want to get into another bad situation. First, you have to lose your own fear. If your customer is open to persuasion, you can help him lose his fear. You do so by performing a few simple steps:

(1) Eat Crow — To recover from a mistake, you must first admit that you made one. You do so by admitting and apologizing. What is important here is that you not pass the buck when you apologize; the customer does not care if it was the shipping department that messed up his order while you, the honest salesman, did your best to take care of him. The customer looks at the entire company as one person. Either say: “We screwed up and we’re sorry” or “I screwed up and I’m sorry.” If your customer wants to vent, let him and empathize with him. He is angry, and without venting that anger, he will not be able to move beyond the current issue.

(2) Make Good — In advertising, there is a concept called a “make good” that kicks in when promises are unfulfilled. For instance, if an advertiser buys an ad for a particular TV show with a particular ratings expectation and the show delivers well below that expectation, the advertiser may well receive

a “make good” — a free ad that completes the exposure expectation. Whatever business you are in, you can figure out a “make-good” gesture. What is important is that the gesture be proportional to the screw-up. If you cause a company downtime that cost it \$30,000, a \$15 candy basket may not be good enough. “Make goods” are designed to assign some of the burden to you, so if you want the business back, you should be prepared to make it worthwhile.

(3) Resell — Now it is time to rediscover the reasons your customer was doing business with you in the first place. Ask some good questions and present some powerful benefits that remind the customer why he enjoyed your company as a supplier. Present and close again. If it is appropriate, gently remind your customer about the positive relationship you have had.

Above all, do not compete with your customer. Sometimes, the customer is so upset or disillusioned that he is not willing to change his mind. When this happens, it is important not to make a contest of the dialogue; when you argue with

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your customer, you always lose. If the customer is dead set on not accepting your apology or resell overtures, it is best to let the problem rest for a while.

Depending on how serious your service issue was, winning your customer back can range from an easy project to an impossible one. If you are fortunate enough to regain his business, do not allow yourself to get back into the same position — work to strengthen the relationship until it will withstand some service issues. Whatever

you do, make sure you do it with class and integrity. ■

Troy Harrison is the author of “Sell Like You Mean It” and “The Pocket Sales Manager.”

He helps companies navigate the elements of sales on their journeys to success. To schedule a free 45-minute Sales Strategy Review, call (913) 645-3603 or email troy@troyharrison.com. Visit www.troyharrison.com.

