

## **Make Outstanding Customer Service the Rule, not the Exception**

In a world where people's choices are limitless, how does a small business, surrounded by fierce competition, stay ahead - by offering outstanding customer service. This means connecting with clients, making them feel special, and going above and beyond their expectations.

### **Customer service is more than making a sale**

Many business owners are diligent about practicing the basics of customer service - greet your customers immediately, practice active listening, be attentive - but they still find they are not getting the repeat business or word-of-mouth advertising they desire. There is no great secret to customer service; it's more about building relationships than following the rules.

"Customer service means making people feel respected, heard and cared for. The nature of being human is that we like to feel good and feel that the business cares more about us as people rather than just about taking our money. This is what distinguishes the mediocre businesses from those that really excel," says Yavhel Velazquez, Manager of WorldHost® Training Services.

Thia Trinh, owner of Station Express Café in Vancouver is a good example of how to really connect with customers. Trinh has customers who walk right past Starbucks and Tim Horton's just to get to her shop and she's the first to admit that it's not because her coffee is unbeatable. "What Station Express Café offers that other coffee shops don't is an atmosphere that engages our clients. It's about taking an interest in them and making them understand that as a customer, they're important to us and we genuinely care about them."

As customers approach the counter to make an order, Trinh and her staff remember their names, what they like to eat or drink and will ask a question or two about what's going on in that person's life. "Often times working here and serving our customers feels like being part of a big family," says Trinh.

### **Service skills do not come naturally**

Having good people skills will always serve you well in business, but they will only take you so far when it comes to customer service. Business owners and their employees need to understand how to approach and handle clients in a way that makes their experience a memorable one.

"Having a commitment to your clients means training yourself and your staff to really appreciate the value of the customer," says Velazquez. "Everyone in the business who deals with customers needs to know how to listen to them, communicate effectively and how to resolve concerns that might arise. These are skills that are not naturally acquired. Your staff might be friendly but training will teach skills on how to be effective in customer service."

Denise Pallesen of Nutters Bulk & Natural Foods in Cranbrook does just that. Besides ensuring that her staff has customer service training and the most up-to-date information on the products in the store, Pallesen holds reminder sessions with tips on customer service.

“My staff knows that making a sale is not their primary motivator; customer service is. My business is health related and we often give our customers all kinds of information on different products without making a sale. Because they feel we care about their needs, they’ll come back again and become loyal customers.” acknowledges Pallesen. “Proper training and making sure that knowledge stays in the forefront of the mind when dealing with customers is the most important thing.”

### **Customers spread the word: good or bad**

Many businesses will spend thousands on marketing and branding to bring in clients, but once they have those clients, they fail to retain them because of their customer service practices. A loyal client is the lifeline of a business, but even more so, an unhappy client can cause problems.

“We know from statistics that 96 per cent of dissatisfied customers will not tell a business owner directly that they’re unhappy,” states Velazquez. “Like viral marketing, they spread the word to another ten individuals about their negative experience and that spreads even further. A business owner should know that for every complaint received, there are in fact 26 other customers with similar concerns.”

Immediate and excellent customer service will leave a positive emotional footprint in customers’ minds and that will become one of the most powerful and persuasive marketing tools you can have. Ensuring that your customers have a wonderful experience is essential, but showing them that you’ll go above and beyond for them will lead your clients to share their positive experience with others.

### **There are no exceptions to customer opinions**

Feedback is the most concrete way to figure out what your customers really think of your product or service and to stay in tune with their needs. Create ways for them to provide you with their thoughts, comments and concerns.

“Getting customer feedback does not mean just putting out a suggestion box,” says Velazquez. “One good example is a restaurant in Victoria that posts all of their client comments, good and bad, up on a board and then they note on the board what action they’ve taken to resolve the concerns that clients have. That’s a great way of making a commitment and taking action to honour your clients.”

If someone has taken the time to offer feedback, it must be significant to them and should be significant to you. Developing methods for clients to communicate with you and then taking action on their comments will build their trust and boost their confidence in your company.

The bottom-line when it comes to serving clients, is to ask yourself, is what I’m offering them something they’ll tell their friends and family about? Remarkable customer service combined with exceeding your clients’ expectations will result in a loyal customer base that will be the foundation for your success.

*Tourism British Columbia has been delivering world class customer service training to business since 1985 through SuperHost® now enhanced and re-branded as WorldHost®. For more information on WorldHost® training visit [www.tourismbc.com/worldhost\\_training\\_services](http://www.tourismbc.com/worldhost_training_services).*

*Around the corner or around the province, Women's Enterprise Centre is helping women start, grow, and succeed in business by offering business advisory services, business skills training, business loans, resources, publications and referrals.*

*Call us at 1.800.643.7014 or email [info@womensenterprise.ca](mailto:info@womensenterprise.ca) from anywhere in BC.*