

Ag Marketing

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The Customer is Still King

Regardless of your direct marketing outlet (farmers' market, on-farm stand, CSA, or Pick-Your-Own), great customer service is the undeniable business principle that cannot be neglected in order to have a sustainable and profitable business. Even though we're increasingly connected by our electronic devices and messages, the human side of doing business still matters.

At the start of the market season, most producers are attentive to new and returning customers. But, too many producers think customer service is like going to the dentist—something you have to think about every six months or so or when there's a problem and it's really hurting their business. But if you think like a customer, then you will see the need to be continuous rather than

the occasional or shotgun approaches to customer service. It's defined by the way you systematically handle the problems that occur with your customers on a daily basis.

Things do go wrong, marketing surveys indicate that 25 percent of all consumer purchases result in some type of problem. It seems like a very high percentage until you factor in the additional data that reveals that 70 percent of people who experience a problem do not complain. The reason they don't complain is:

1. They do not think complaining is worth their time or effort,
2. They don't know how or where to complain or,
3. They want to avoid conflict.

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Photo by: Edwin Remsberg

One of the most cost-effective marketing strategies your business can pursue is to provide outstanding customer service. That means fixing things that have gone wrong, i.e. receiving the complaint; responding to it in a timely manner. If you fail to fix the problem you might experience the following:

- ◆ 64 to 91 percent of those who had a problem, but didn't complain, will not return.
- ◆ 55 to 81 percent of those who complain and don't get satisfaction will not return.
- ◆ At one time, the rule of thumb was the dissatisfied customers tell an average of 10 other people about their bad experiences. But, with the advent of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, an unhappy customer can tell hundreds of their friends and their friends "friends" about their unsatisfactory experience with your products or services.

Effective handling of customer complaints and attention to customer service details can turn those statistics in your favor. Allowing customers to vent, listening intently, and making sure the solution satisfies the customer can distinguish your business from your competitor's in the customer's mind.

Good customer service means:

1. Having knowledge about your products, your inventory, and your experiences with the product that will help your customer make the best choice for them. For example, it's difficult to help a market customer decide purchasing bok choy or Russian kale if you've never eaten or cooked with them.
2. Treat customers with a friendly, helpful attitude. Don't be patronizing but, do greet them with a smile and try to connect with them.
3. Thank them for making a purchase or for just stopping by.

Don't neglect training your employees in good customer relations too. Help your employees develop their "people" skills as well as their knowledge about your operation. They are often the person unhappy customers will approach first.