

SALES AND SERVICE Excellence

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Service Matters Most

Especially in challenging times.

BY RON KAUFMAN

AS THE WIND OF ECONOMIC cycles blow hard, some managers try to contain costs by cutting corners on customer service. This is the *wrong* thing to do.

Service matters now more than ever for four reasons: 1. When people buy during an economic downturn, they are conscious of the hard-earned money that they spend. Customers want *more attention*, more appreciation, and more recognition when making their purchases with you, not less. 2. Customers want to get maximum value for the money they spend. They want assistance, education, training, installation, modifications, and support. The basic product may remain the same, but they want *more service*. 3. Customers want firmer guarantees that their purchase was the right thing to do. In tough times, every expenditure is scrutinized. *Provide the assurance* your customers seek with generous service guarantees, regular follow-up and speedy followthrough on all queries and complaints.

4. In tough times, people talk more with each other about saving money and getting good value. *Positive word-of-mouth* is a powerful force at any time.

In difficult times, even more ears will be listening. Be sure the words spoken about your business are good ones!

Eight Secrets of Superior Service

Giving good service in tough times makes good business sense. But how do you actually achieve it? Here are eight proven principles you can use.

1. Know how your customers' expectations are rising and changing over time. What was good enough last year may not be good enough now. Use customer surveys, interviews and focus groups to understand what your customers really want, what they value and what they believe they are getting (or not getting) from your business.

2. Use quality service to differentiate your business from your competition. Your products may be reliable and up-to-date, but your competitors' goods are, too. Your delivery systems may be fast and user-friendly, but so are your competitors'! You can make a more lasting difference by providing personalized, responsive and extra-mile service that stands out in a way your customers will appreciate

and remember.

3. Set and achieve high service standards. You can go beyond basic and expected levels of service to provide your customers with desired and even surprising service interactions. Determine the standard for service in your industry, and then find a way to go beyond it. Give more choice than 'the usual', be more flexible than 'normal', be faster than 'the average', and extend a better warranty than all the others. Your customers will notice your higher standards. But eventually those standards will be copied by your competitors, too. So don't slow down. Keep stepping UP!

4. Learn to manage your customers' expectations. You need to bring customer expectations into line with what you know you can deliver. Build a reputation for making and keeping clear promises. Once you establish trust and good reputation, you only need to ask customers for their patience when you can't meet their first requests. Usually they'll extend you leeway. Another way to manage customers' expectations is to under-promise, then over-deliver. For example: you know your customer wants something done

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fast. You know it will take an hour to complete. Don't tell your customer it will take an hour. Instead, let them know you will *rush* on their behalf, but promise a 90-minute timeframe. Then, when you finish in just one hour, your customer will be delighted to find that you finished the job 'so quickly'. That's 'under promise, then over deliver'.

5. Bounce back with effective service recovery. Sometimes things do go wrong. When it happens to your customers, do everything you can to set things right. Fix the problem and show sincere concern for any discomfort, frustration, or inconvenience. Then do a little more by giving your customer something positive to remember—a token of goodwill, a gift of appreciation, a discount on future orders, an upgrade to a higher class of product.

6. Appreciate your complaining customers. Customers with complaints can help you improve your business. They point out where your system is faulty or your procedures are weak and problematic. They show where your products or services are below expectations. They point out areas where your competitors are getting ahead or where your staff is falling behind. These are the same insights and conclusions companies pay consultants to provide. But a complainer gives them to you free!

7. Take personal responsibility. In many organizations, people are quick to blame others for problems or difficulties at work: managers blame staff, staff blame managers, Engineering blames Sales, Sales blames Marketing and everyone blames Finance. This does not help. In fact, all the fingerpointing make things much worse. The

most reliable way to bring about constructive change in your organization is to take personal responsibility and help make good things happen. When you see something that needs to be done, do it. If you see something that needs to be done in another department, recommend it. Be the person who makes suggestions, proposes new ideas and volunteers to help on problem solving teams, projects, and solutions.

8. See the world from each customer's point of view. We often get so caught up in our own world that we lose sight of what our customers actually experience. Make time to stand on the other side of the counter or listen on the other end of the phone. Be a 'mystery shopper' at your own place of business. Or become a customer of your best competition. What you notice when you look from the 'other side' is what your customers experience every day.

Service is the currency that keeps our economy moving: "I serve you in one business, you serve me in another." When either of us improves, the economy gets a little better.

Use these eight principles to build a superior service culture.

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Ron Kaufman is a motivator, trainer, consultant, and author of UP! Your Service and the inspirational book series Lift Me UP! Visit www.UpYourService.com.

ACTION:
Build a superior service culture to achieve and enjoy a sustainable competitive advantage.



UP! Your Service enables organizations to quickly upgrade service performance and secure a sustainable advantage by building an Uplifting Service culture.

The UP! Your Service methodology aligns, integrates and accelerates your activity in three essential areas: Service Leadership, Service Education, and The 12 Building Blocks of Service Culture. This proven approach leads to an action-oriented culture empowering everyone to delight customers and colleagues with consistently Uplifting Service.

UP! Your Service was founded by Ron Kaufman, one of the world's most sought-after educators, consultants, and thought-leaders in the world of superior service. Ron is a regular columnist at *Bloomberg BusinessWeek*. He is the author of 15 books on service, business and inspiration and has been featured in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today*.

With offices in Singapore and the USA, UP! Your Service works with a diverse clientele of businesses, associations and government agencies throughout the world.

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