

# Writing The Book On Great Customer Service

By Tim Knox

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Q: One of the big chain bookstores recently opened up near my small book store. Already I can see my business starting to decline. Is there anything I can do to compete with the bigger store or should I just accept the inevitable?  
-- Peter Q.

A: A wise man once said, "The inevitable is never a sure thing."

Don't be so quick to close the book on your business, Peter. You probably can't compete with the superstore on volume of inventory or on price, but there are other things you can do to help keep the customers coming in your door. One of the best ways to ensure customer loyalty is to offer superior customer service.

It's funny that you're a bookseller. Let me tell you about my last visit to one of the big chain bookstores just a few weeks ago.

I took my teenage daughter in to find the classic book, The Once and Future King, for a school project that has to be done over the summer. It was a Sunday afternoon and the store was crawling with customers. We spent fifteen minutes scouring this great warehouse of a bookstore, but couldn't find the book anywhere. We also couldn't find anyone who worked there to ask for help.

Finally, I went up to the front counter and asked the apathetic

looking teenager who was manning the register if they had the book in stock. She looked at me as if I'd asked her to do advanced calculus in her head and said, "I dunno."

I asked if she might check her computer for me. She looked at me again, this time as if I'd just asked her to rotate the tires on my car without a jack. After a minute of tapping the keys with her long fingernails (which were painted black, by the way) she said, "Yeah, we have it."

"Great," I said. "Where can I find it?"

She glanced at the screen again and said, "It says that it's in the classics section."

"Great," I said again. I use the word "great" a lot when I'm trying to restrain myself from strangling incompetent sales people. "Where might the classics section be?"

She didn't bother to look at me or the computer this time. She just shrugged and said, "Beats me, man. I've only worked her a week. "

I wanted to ask if there was anyone who had worked there long enough to know where the ^%\$# classics section was, but by that time there were a dozen or so people lining up behind me to pay for books they had somehow managed to find on their own.

I went home and ordered the book online. So much for supporting my local bookseller.

It's a shame your store isn't located near me, Peter. I'll bet if I walked in and asked for a copy of *The Once and Future King* you would be able to tell me almost to the square inch where the book is on the shelf in your store. I'll also bet that if you didn't have a copy in stock you would go out of your way to order it for me.

That is what superior customer service is all about: going the extra mile to satisfy your customer. That is what will keep customers coming back to your store time and time again.

Superior customer service leads to greater customer satisfaction, which leads to repeat business, which leads to the holy grail of the retail business: customer loyalty.

Here are a few tips on how to deliver superior customer service and build customer loyalty:

1. Anyone on your staff who deals directly with the customers should be well groomed and dressed appropriately for the job. Customers over 25 years old will not get a warm and fuzzy feeling if the guy processing their credit card is wearing an Ozzy Osborne tee-shirt and matching nose ring.

2. Sales people should be knowledgeable about the product they are selling. I can't tell you how many times I have asked a sales person a simple question and only got a blank stare in return. A lack of product knowledge does nothing to instill confidence in the customer.

3. Your staff should know where every product is without having to ask a manager or consult a computer. At the very least they should be able to point out the ^%\$# classics section without blinking an eye.

4. Make it a point to know your customer's name. Nothing makes a customer feel special like the sound of his or her own name. You can't remember everyone's name, of course, but you should strive to remember the names of those customers who come in regularly. I frequent one particular restaurant and the owner not only knows my name, but the names of my wife and kids. And every time I set foot in his restaurant he calls me by name and shakes my hand and personally leads me to a table. I don't feel like a customer. I feel like a friend.

5. Offer personal services that the big boys do not. Anything you can do to make your customer's life easier will be appreciated and remembered. If a customer comes in and asks for a book you do not have, offer to order the book and deliver it to their home so they don't have to make another trip to pick it up. All this is going to cost you is a few minutes of your time and you will not only save a sale, but also make a lasting impression on that customer. The next time they need a book they will head your way.

There are other things you can do to combat the bookstore Goliath, Peter, but offering superior customer service is a great place to start.

Here's to your success!

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Small Business Q&A is written by veteran entrepreneur and syndicated columnist, Tim Knox. Tim serves as the president and CEO of three successful technology companies: B2Secure Inc., a Web-based hiring management software company; Digital Graphiti Inc., a software development company; and Sidebar Systems, a company that creates-cutting edge convergence software for broadcast media outlets. Tim is also the founder of OnlineProfits4U.com, an ebusiness dedicated to the success of online entrepreneurs.

Tim is also the Ebusiness Startup and Design Expert for Entrepreneur.com, the website of the national publication Entrepreneur Magazine.

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