

Customers for Keeps – Winning the Game

By Cheryl Crumb

As a retailer, what do you think is your most valuable commodity? Your inventory? Your property? Your receivables?... No, it's your customers.

A beautiful store with lots of products and no customers buying, doesn't spell success. We've probably all laughed at the sign: "I have so much work to do...why do these damn customers keep getting in my way?" The last laugh, however, is on us. Customers who feel that they've been treated with respect and concern will return; those treated with indifference, won't.

So, what makes customers so valuable? What's the price tag associated with an empty store? Or the cost of having your customer shopping at a competitor's store? A loyal customer might spend tens of thousands of dollars over the course of a ten-year period. The successful retailer knows the benefits of returning customers.

How do we keep our customers? Business games teach us how to make money. Marketing games tell us how to attract customers. The "Customers for Keeps" game, presented in this article, teaches us how to keep customers.

The game is based on the simple premise that our goal is to enrich our customers' lives and that the measures of success in achieving this goal are our revenues, returning customers, and referrals. The key is not to get the goal and the measures reversed. Too many people think we're in the business of making money. What's wrong with that? **If we focus on making money, we usually lose sight of the customer**, but if we focus on enriching customers' lives...the line of returning customers will swell the company coffers.

So, how do we play this game of "Customers for Keeps"? Think Baseball. Picture the baseball diamond that we call "The Customer Relationship Diamond". Our objective is to get the player to home plate. Central to our game and located at the pitcher's mound is good communication. Through dialogue with our customers, we

establish and nurture a lasting business relationship. Customers reach the "at bat" position through advertising, word-of-mouth and memorable past experiences. From this point on, it's the job of the retailer to advance the batter/customer to all the bases and get him to home plate.

First Base is "Hosting". Hosting a customer is the same as welcoming an honored guest into our home, we anticipate his needs and prepare accordingly. The astute retailer welcomes his customer with information, policies, systems, and comforts that communicate, "You're special".

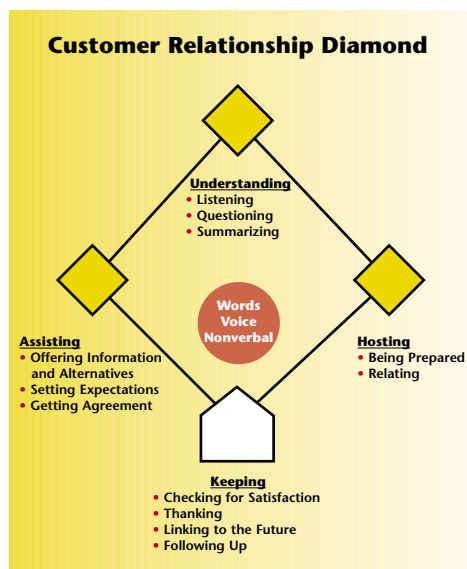
Second base is labeled "Understanding", oftentimes the hardest base of all to reach. To get our customer from first to second base, we must ask questions and listen actively to understand what the customer has in mind. Why is this important? Consider the following; most customers don't know what they want...they have a vague idea and need assistance in clarifying their wants. In our baseball analogy, too many players try to steal second base, usually with predictable results. "You're OUT!" screams the umpire.

Stealing the base in our retail game assumes that we know what the customer really wants. We rush to "sell" rather than to help the customer complete his thinking process. How do we help him to clarify his thinking? By asking questions about what he thinks he wants, why it's important, what's driving him to make a purchase, what the issues and concerns are, what else is currently considered, who else is affected by the purchase, what his interests are...? There are many questions the retailer can use to understand what the customer has in mind.

Third base is about "Assisting". Armed with insight into the ideas and expectations of the customer, the retailer is now equipped to offer information and alternatives. Consider that customers don't want merely to be "sold something", they want to participate in the process, to interact, to select from a variety of options. Ultimately, the

final decision is that of the customer. When retailers see their role as working in partnership with the consumer to make the best decision, everyone benefits.

Does the wise retailer stop there? Never! Leaving a customer stranded at third base can cost you the game. Our goal is to get the customer to home plate, or what our game calls the "Keeping" base. By being proactive in contacting the customer to follow-up on his decision, whether sale or no sale, the retailer demonstrates genuine care. Our customer, safely at home plate, feels this respect and concern and will undoubtedly return for future business.



So, that's the game. It's a simple one but so often misplayed. The rules are clear. Focus on your customer first and foremost. Reach the bases in sequence; from "hosting", to "understanding", to "assisting", to "keeping". Leaving a customer stranded at any one of the bases creates an opportunity for your competition to keep your customer. You win when your customer wins.

Customers are hard to find and they're harder to keep. The quality of your products isn't enough to earn their loyalty. But the concern you display for their well-being, before, during and after the sale, will differentiate you. Try it and see what happens. ●