

Making the Customer Connection

By T. Scott Gross

There were more than a dozen sitting around the conference table watching a high energy marketing representative unveil next year's plan. It was awful; not awful in the sense that the materials weren't well done or that there weren't enough of them; not awful in the sense that the slogan wasn't catchy or the coupons would be difficult to handle.

It was awful because it gave away the store. It was awful because it was more of the same discounting that has nearly ruined the pizza industry.

Let's see a show of hands, please. How many of you know anyone who pays full retail for pizza? See! Only those who have so much money or so little sense that the price is academic. The rest of the world buys pizza with coupons. Pizza is probably the world's best, or poorest, example of over-discounting.

"Here's a novel idea," I suggested. "Why not an ad campaign that talks about our great products and simply wonderful service? We could give our customers a reason for coming in besides a give-away deal!"

"That sounds great in theory. But in the real world, I have strong competition on both sides of me, less than a few blocks away. I have to discount." (That was from an operator whose sales were flat and promised to take a turn for the worse.)

I was reminded of the old joke when the guy says, "I lose a little on every sale but I make up for it in volume!"

My wife and best friend, Melanie, looked uncomfortable. On the way home she said, "Discounts. That's all we hear is discounts. I wanted to ask what they were doing to establish a personal relationship with their customers!"

And I couldn't help but imagine other meetings being held in other parts of the city. I imagined that in those meetings, franchisees for other chains were also too frightened of the competition to say "no" to discounting.

How to Establish a Personal Relationship with Your Customers

My wife was right on target. Establishing a personal relationship is the very hallmark of the hospitality industry. It is the one advantage that independents have over the chains. Too bad so many independents fail to capitalize on this important competitive edge.

"I'm so glad your food is good," said a lady with a face I didn't recognize as belonging to one of our regular customers.

"I'm glad, too," I smiled. "But we sort of expect our food to be good!"

"Me, too," she said. "It's just that even if your food wasn't so good, I would buy

from you anyway because of all the good things you do in the community."

We follow a few simple rules for loving on our customers.

Our customers love us in return and support us with or without coupons.

Eight Rules for Strong Public Relations

1. *Remember the customer even when they are not buying.* If you don't see a regular for awhile, do you call to find out if everything is okay? We do!

2. *Support causes the customer holds important.* There are dozens, maybe hundreds of charities that you could support. Almost all of them are worthy. But since it is physically and financially impossible to support every one, why not find out which causes your customers care about most and support those?

3. *Give something free of cost and occasion.* Once in a while, give the customer something "just because". If you need an official excuse, create a holiday.

We were dining at the Peach Tree Tea Room this past Valentine Day when the owner stopped at every table and presented each lady with a beautiful carnation. It didn't cost much but the thought alone made the occasion special. Several days later, we had a houseful of unexpected out-of-town guests. Where do you think

we took them for brunch? All for the price of a carnation!)

4. *Be a product and service fanatic.* A friend of mine tells a story about dining at a new restaurant. She says the service was excellent but the food, although tasty, was stone cold! The waitress was distracted by a large party and, not wanting to hold up the others at her table, my friend continued with the meal. When the waitress checked back and discovered the problem, she alerted the manager who promptly visited the table and offered to replace the meal. Wrong! He should have insisted on replacing the meal and removing it from the check. Instead he put the decision on the back of the customer.

A product and service fanatic comes “unglued” when things aren’t perfect. Customers see that and develop confidence that management puts customers ahead of profits.

5. *Demonstrate that customers are first by respecting their time.* If you must make customers wait at least act concerned. When you value a customer’s time, you value the customer as a human being. Do everything you can to make the wait shorter or at least seem shorter by making it more pleasant.

Where do your customers wait? What do you do to make the wait pleasant? Do you keep them informed of progress?

6. *Ask for the customer’s opinion.* Asking for the customer’s opinion makes the customer an owner. Comment cards are important but at least

occasionally run from the kitchen with a hot taste of a new or potential menu item.

Customers know more about your business than you because they see it from the perspective of someone who must open her purse to pay.

Ask and customers will tell you exactly what you must do to get them to visit more often.

7. *Know the customer by name.* (This one does not need an explanation!)

8. *Invite the customer to play.* Customers, particularly today, are looking for more than food in a box. They want more than fast service and clean surroundings. They want an experience.

Inviting your customers to play creates fun and involvement. We’ve nearly perfected the art. Think about how you can have fun with your guests!