

McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond

Certified Public Accountants/Business Consultants

Industrial Manufacturing

Better customer service crucial in down economy

Times are tough. The marketplace is competitive. You need an edge to keep your customers from going to your competitors.



The more homogeneous your products or services are, the more critical it is that your customer service be the best it can be. Don't take current customers for granted in your vigor to get new customers.

At the same time, you need to manage your cost structure. How can you enhance your customers' experience without breaking the bank?

Think like your customer. Your customers are probably trying to be frugal just as you are.

Perhaps you can help them work smarter. What information can you offer that will help them get the most from your product or service?

For example, one company sent success stories to illustrate how various customers were using the products and services. Those stories gave other customers ideas they could implement.

Sharing knowledge can build goodwill and help your customers save time and money.

Save your customers more by selling them more. Shipping costs have skyrocketed because of the price of gasoline. Can you reduce your customers' costs and yours by suggesting bundling options or economic order quantities?

Depending on the sophistication of your customers, they may not be thinking of these things themselves. This can truly be a win/win.

Improve your customer service department's knowledge. How often do your customer service representatives have to go to others for answers to a customer's question? Do your reps understand the customers' businesses so that they can better anticipate their questions?

Now is a great time to enhance the knowledge level in your customer service department. Training can be done from within your company.

In other cases, your vendors might be willing to come in and train the reps on their product lines. Take advantage of the time to make your team more knowledgeable and, therefore, more helpful.

Maximize the way you use your equipment. Many companies know only a fraction of what their phone systems and computer systems will do. Ask the software and telephone system vendors to take a look at what you're doing and suggest ways to make it more efficient – for you and your customers. They may suggest add-on features, but often there are features you're already paying for that aren't being used to their fullest advantage.

Make it easy for customers to do business with you. Look at your ordering systems. Are they easy to navigate? Is it easy for your customers to find the information they are looking for? How about your invoices? Are they easy to read and process? Are they timely and accurate?

Billing may not be part of the customer service department, but it is surely part of the customer experience. Make sure you're easy to buy from and to pay.

Listen to your own automated attendant, if you have one. How long does it take to get to a live person? Do you have to listen through lengthy instructions before making a selection?

Automated attendants can be helpful and efficient, but they can also be annoying. Make sure your system is user friendly and doesn't leave customers in voice-mail purgatory. There's not much that's more annoying than that.

Don't assume you know how your system works. Call in and "be a customer" to see what it feels like. Take notes and address the snags you see. When you're involved with your vendors, note what drives you crazy about their customer service process, and then measure it against your own. You might be surprised to find that you have some of the same issues.

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McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond

11311 McCormick Road, Suite 100
Hunt Valley, MD 21031
410.296.6200

www.mksh.com

70 Thomas Johnson Drive, Suite 100
Frederick, MD 21702
301.662.2400