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Holding on to your customers

*“Make new friends and keep the old...
One is silver and the other gold!”*

Girl Scout Camp Song

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Here are a couple of points that anyone who has been in our business for more than twenty minutes will agree on:

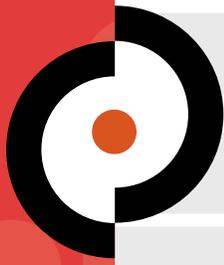
- The more accounts you write on a weekly basis the more money you will make.
- The way to write a lot of accounts is to keep the existing accounts and constantly add new ones.
- It is much easier to keep a customer than to find a new one.

While attracting new business is always important, the secret to long-term success is maintaining your existing customer base. This is particularly true in areas with slow growth or in a tight economy. In spite of this fact, many sales reps give very little thought to their “regulars”. They spend hours courting new accounts trying to win them over while a sales call on many longstanding accounts may consist of “any changes this week?”

Even more remarkable; salespeople often dedicate inordinate amounts of time to their worst customers. The accounts that need 5 proofs for every ad, or who keep the rep coming back for copy for their 2 inch ad fall into this category. Another high maintenance account is the business owner who always seems to forget their checkbook when you stop to collect a payment. We spend endless hours running around to service these accounts. We all have these types of customers and it is our job to take care of them. Just be careful that you don't neglect your best customers to tend the needs of your worst.

Someone once told me “Customers are not statues, don't take them for granite!” Every call should be a sales call. It is very easy to get in the habit of making 5-minute calls where you pick up ad copy and leave a tear-page and an invoice. These calls do not build your relationship with

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an advertiser. You don't need to make a full-blown presentation every time you visit an account, but you should take every opportunity to learn more about the customer's business and uncover needs. You should make it your business to know what plans the advertiser has for the future and what changes are occurring in his market area. Schedule a meeting at the beginning of each quarter or before the customer's busy season to determine their goals and plan their advertising strategy.

You should also take every opportunity to remind your customers why they became customers in the first place. Remind them of the key features and benefits of your publication on every call. This constant repetition will burn your story into their brain. They will be better prepared to defend their decision to advertise with you when a competitor is trying to take the business.

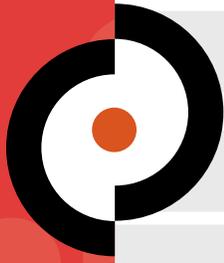
Regularly bring your customers new ideas and create new looks for their ads. This demonstrates your desire to help the customer and your willingness to work for their business. Customers are busy and count on us for ideas. If all you do is ask for a check and a list of the week's specials, the customer may get the impression that all you care about is their money. Creative ideas are a very cost effective way to add value for the customer and keep them loyal.

Many reps do not try to up-sell their existing clients for fear of "rocking the boat." When you recommend a larger program you are forced to learn more about the customer and to present the benefits of your product. In fact the worst thing that can happen when you try to up-sell an existing client is that you will have educated your customer about your publication's benefits. The best thing is that you will often make the sale. Remember many more accounts are lost because they were undersold than oversold. Bigger programs produce bigger results. Bigger results mean happy advertisers.

Here are a few more ideas to build customer loyalty:

- **Live up to your word**—develop a reputation for reliability. Deliver on your promises no matter how small. If you say you will be there at 3 be there or call the customer to apologize and to reschedule. Customers appreciate sales people who respect them and their time.

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- **Under promise and over deliver.** Manage your customer's expectations. Extravagant promises may help make a sale but will do irreparable harm to your long-term relationship with the customer.
- **Constantly ask for feedback**—assume that “no news is good news” and you may be unpleasantly surprised. Find out if the customer is happy with the results from their ads. By proactively soliciting feedback, you will be able to make changes in the program before the customer is lost.
- **Keep good notes and records**—Remember even when the customer doesn't.
- **Pay attention to details**—check and double check every thing, mistakes happen but you don't have to make them yourself.
- **Treat your customer as a person** not as a source of revenue. Be genuinely interested in helping them. More accounts are lost for emotional reasons than over ad response or price.
- **Anticipate your customer's needs**—remind the customer of upcoming opportunities, have ads ready before they ask for them.
- **Be a resource**—keep your customers informed of what is going on in the market and in his industry. Share ads from similar businesses and share items you see in the business press.
- **Always say “Thank You”**—sincerely thank your customer. Companies are quick to send a letter to delinquent accounts, how many send out a thank you note to the accounts that always pay on time? Let your customers know you appreciate their business.

True sales professionals are known by their ability to maintain a long-term relationship with customers. A sales agreement is just a piece of paper; customers can choose to break a contract at any time. What keeps customers advertising is their belief in the product and their confidence in their sales rep. It is the sales reps job to continuously build and strengthen their relationships with their customers.

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburg Pennysaver.

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