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Customers for life

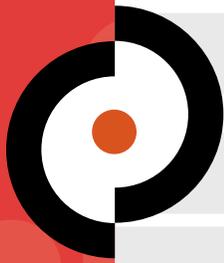
Prospecting and landing new customers is one of the most demanding jobs in sales. Sometimes this takes months of work, with no guarantee of success in the end. This is why it feels so good when you land a new advertiser. Most sales training puts heavy emphasis on selling new accounts. Since it is so difficult to win new business, smart salespeople do every thing they can to hold on to every account. This requires building strong long-term relationships with their current advertisers. When it comes to your account base, the 80/20 rule applies—80% of your revenue is likely to come from your regular customers. Here are a few ideas on how to hold on to your most valuable asset, your customers:

Start off on the right foot – Remember first impressions last a long time. Check and double-check everything to make sure the first sale meets, or even better, exceeds, the customer’s expectations. Remember this is a new experience for the client, so explain everything in great detail so that they fully understand the run dates, billing etc. If you “under-promise and over deliver” you will leave an indelible positive impression with the advertiser. The impressions the customer forms of you and your company will color your relationship as long as you work together.

Constantly ask questions – Get to know the customer’s business inside and out. The more information you gather about the advertiser’s business, the better you will be able to help them. An in-depth knowledge of their business combined with your knowledge of your company’s capabilities will allow you to see opportunities even the customer may miss. As long as you are helping the client achieve their business goals, they will continue advertising with you.

Be a resource – As a sales person you talk to many businesses in your territory. Because of this you are in a unique position to help your customer. You can keep your clients informed on what’s going on in the market. You can provide them with leads and introduce them to people who can help them. You also have access to ideas and information that can help the customer’s business. By acting as a true consultant and a resource to the advertiser, you become a walking, talking product enhancement. When a customer needs to make cuts, they may not want to lose you as a resource and look to cut corners elsewhere.

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Every call is a sales call – You can not afford to make “service calls.” Don’t become a professional visitor. Deliver value to the customer on every call. Frequently bring the customer new ideas for their ads, bring them leads from other clients etc. Making a call “just to touch base” or “just to see if there are any changes in the ad this week” doesn’t help the customer’s business. Every call should be an exchange of information, when you leave you should know more about their business and the client should know more about what you can do to help them.

The best defense is a good offense – Do not be afraid to up sell your current customers. Many sales people are reluctant to “rock the boat” and recommend a larger program to their advertisers. When you present a new product to a customer, you are forced to present the features and benefits of your publication to the customer. Even if the customer doesn’t purchase the enhanced program, you’ve had the opportunity to remind them why they bought from you in the first place. The best case scenario is that they buy the larger program; this not only helps you but also helps the customer by making them more prominent and bringing more customers in through the door. Remember many more customers are lost by underselling them than overselling them. The more effective the program, the more loyal the customer.

Ask for feedback – When Ed Koch was mayor of New York City he was famous for walking the streets of the city asking everyone he met “How am I doing?” You should do the same with your customers. You do not want to be surprised; you want to know what your clients are thinking about your products, good or bad. Constantly seek feedback. Ask “Is there anything else I can do for you?” “Do you have any concerns I should know about?” “Is the program doing all you expected?” It is much better to know the customer is dissatisfied when there is time to revamp the program, rather to find out when they decide not to renew it and go with the competition.

Build strong personal relationships – Nurture your relationship with the customer and their employees. People want to be valued as individuals, not just for their checkbook. Be genuinely interested in the customer, people can spot insincerity a mile away. Always inquire about the customer’s health and their family. Try to learn about their interests outside of work. Whenever possible add value to the relationship by clipping articles or recommending websites, which might be of interest to the customer. Remember their birthday and other significant events in their life. When you have a strong personal relationship with a client you will receive more honest feedback from them

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and they will be more forthcoming about their future plans and goals. Your relationship with the customer should be personal but professional. Do not let the customer use the relationship to take advantage of you.

Be trustworthy – The Boy Scout Law says “A Scout tells the truth. He keeps his promises. Honesty is part of his code of conduct. People can depend on him.” Change the word “Scout” to “Sales person” and make this your code. Nothing is so important to maintaining sound relationships with your customers than maintaining a high level of trust. Always be completely upfront with your advertisers. If there is a problem they should hear it from you. If you make a mistake, admit it. A customer must be able to depend on you and rely on what you tell them.

Say thank you – I saw a sign in a customer’s office that said “Customers aren’t made of stone, so don’t take them for granite.” Never forget that it is ultimately the customer who signs our paycheck, and that they don’t have to advertise with you. Last year my company received a letter from one of our vendor’s accounting department reading “our records indicate that you consistently pay your invoices well within terms and we would like to thank you for your promptness and for your business.” This letter came with a small thank you gift. I am sure you contact customers when their account is delinquent, but when is the last time you thanked someone for paying on time. Send your good customers hand written notes, take them an occasional donut, and patronize their business. Let them know how important they are to you and to your company. Sincerely saying “Thank You” on every possible occasion is absolutely critical to building a strong relationship with your customers.

Conclusion – Maintaining solid relationships with your clients is always a good business practice. In tight economic times it is absolutely imperative. When customers have to cut back, it is never a purely economic decision. The emotions play a part in every business decision your clients make. When you have a good relationship with a client...when they believe you have their best interests in mind...when they believe they can trust you, you have made it very difficult for them to not advertise with you.

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