

Happy Clients Mean Business

As a business owner, you already possess the single most important asset for sales success—even in a challenging economy. Your new business opportunities are hidden in your client list. You can find and close on those valuable leads if you ask your clients for their feedback every time you interact with them.

Client loyalty hinges on delivering good customer service. Loyalty is rooted in emotion—not rational thinking. A Forrester Group study¹ asked customers to rate their experiences on the following criteria:

- Useful—Could you get what you needed to get done?
- Easy—Did you run into hassles in the interaction process?
- Enjoyable—Were you frustrated or disappointed in the interaction?

By aggregating customers' answers, Forrester created a Customer Experience Index (CEI). Forrester concluded that, across all industries, the higher the customer experience index, the more customers came back to buy again and the more loyal the customers were.

If you ask the right three questions, you'll receive more than just three answers.

Ask:

- What do you need/want/desire that we aren't providing?
- Will you buy from us again?
- Will you recommend us to your colleagues?

Use the information to expand your reach into existing markets, discover new markets, and find ways to improve your products, services, and client support and delivery efforts. When you make those improvements, communicate them back to the customer. Not only will you let them know

they were heard, you'll make them part of your success. And they will tell their friends and colleagues. Remember, referrals continue to be the fastest, most cost-efficient way to generate new business. When a client "pre-sells" a colleague, you maximize your marketing and sales budget, and new clients referred to your company will be more likely to tell others.

Cultivating your best clients really pays off. Contact them on a regular basis. Let them know that you appreciate their business and ask what else you do to help them. Also call clients who have disappeared to let them know they are missed. Ask them what you could be doing to help them now.

A word of caution: Once you have started this exchange, your clients will expect you to report back on results. If you don't intend to maintain this dialogue, don't start it. And if you just don't have the time and your staff is maxed out, hire a part-time individual to call clients on your behalf. In fact, delegating this function will actually produce more objective feedback.

For business owners reluctant to allow an external professional contact with clients, a hybrid approach makes sense: the owner can retain contact with his/her best clients and outsource the rest of the interaction and analysis.

No matter which approach you use, expect to see results relatively quickly. Plan to implement the majority of customer recommendations that make sense for your business. And commit to maintaining this client feedback loop—you won't regret it.

¹Petouhoff, N., Ph.D., Leaver, S., Magarie, A., "The Economic Necessity of Customer Service: Five Recession Busting Strategies to Cut Service Costs and Increase Sales," Forrester Research, January 2009

To develop a client cultivation program and to make the most of referrals, contact Essie Escobedo, Office Angels, essie@officeangels.us, 770-442-9246.



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