

5 ways small-business owners can improve customer retention

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Your small business runs on customers and your willingness to grow. Now more than ever before, customer experience plays an important part in retaining repeat business. Whether your small business is a retail store or a physician's office, you need to make sure your customers are getting what they need from your products and services. Here are five tips to make sure your customers keep coming back for more:

1. Employee support.

Who better to sell your product or explain your service than your employees?

Make sure all of your employees are well trained and are able to speak to anyone that walks through the door, calls or emails about the benefits your small business offers. Make sure your employees know what information they should share, and when they should ask a manager -- or you -- to provide the right answer. You must also make sure that you have the right people in customer-facing positions because unhappy employees or shy employees could be bad for business. A customer who has a negative experience with one of your employees can quickly share that with friends and family, and hurt your business' image.

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2. Question your customers.

The only way to know what your customers need and want is by asking. Surveying customers on products/services you have provided, as well as what they seek to obtain from your business, can help put your business plan and customer service into perspective. The upside is that you can refer them to acquire data on your business. Ask them to fill out a survey based

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on their needs, and offer a promotion as an incentive. Knowing what they need will enable you to prepare for great customer service.

3. Offer promotions.

As your business grows, you will start to see which products or services are in demand. You will also start to notice who frequents your business on regular basis. Regulars can be the best word of mouth for your business. Offer promotions on products they continuously use to cement the relationship.

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4. Loyalty programs.

Regulars deserve to be treated a little differently than occasional or prospective customers. Build the relationship with your biggest fans, and their confidence in doing business with you, by offering them something that is only available to top customers. They will likely share their status with other people they know and increase interest in your exclusive circle. Increase interest in the program by offering special deals if they refer family or friends.

5. Utilize social media.

A fast and convenient way of staying connected with customers is through social media. Customers can share information about their experiences within seconds -- in words, photos and videos. That can be great if they had a good experience, but difficult if it wasn't positive because you can't delete negative comments from someone else's social media feed. See

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a bad review? Comment back with an apology or a solution that can bring the customer back for a better experience. Some brands will also include the phone number of a senior manager in their replies to a negative response so that they can take the discussion about the incident offline. (When it's resolved, be sure to append a note to the comment to show the world that you've worked out your differences.) See a good review? Send them thanks and offer a perk. Social media through your customer's word of mouth is valuable organic promotion.

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Applying these five tips can help mold your daily business routines as well as build your brand image. The better customer experience you provide, the larger your business will grow.