



How to ensure you stay front of mind with your customers

Ask yourself when was the last time you won a new customer who ordered from you over and over again? Customers are good, customers who come back and order more are better. Actually they are much better. They are far easier to sell to, they require less education, less maintenance, they already know about you and you already know about them.

Market researchers warn that depending on where you are located, up to 25 percent of your customer or client base will disappear within the next 12 months. Some will move locations, some will close down, and most will simply forget about you. However, even worse than forgetting about you, your more aggressive competitors will steal away another 5-15 percent of people who you have done business with in the past. Marketing experts estimate

that up to 40 percent of your total "past client and contact list" could be disappearing each year, this could put 40 percent of your revenue "at risk".

If you think this seems ridiculous, stop and think about it for a moment. Look at your old customer and client lists and ask yourself how many of them have ever come back to you again. Most businesses only have a vague system for repeatedly marketing back to old customers and others who have contacted their business. In any business, keeping in-touch with your clients is important. It is especially important in the competitive and over crowded promotional products industry. In order to get repeat orders, referrals, and increase customer loyalty, the customer needs to (a) remember your name (b) remember

what you do, and (c) needs to know how to find you.

Why should you be following up with people?

There are many reasons why you should have a systematic approach to following up with customers. Leads are hard to find, new customers are very hard to win and existing customers can be hard to keep. Having a system in place to maximise on all opportunities is imperative to your business. The more you follow up, the better name recognition your client will have with you. Nothing is better for business than customer loyalty. The endless sales, referrals and word of mouth advertising are priceless. By sending your client information about your products, services, and company, the client is not only building a

relationship with you but also building a relationship with your company. So you may find more benefits than just repeat sales.

Who should you be following up with?

The most important asset of any business, including yours, is not the fixtures, the computers or even the people. The most important asset is "the list". It is that collection of names and addresses of everyone who has ever expressed any interest in hearing anything you have to say. These are people who will give you permission to market to them. This list should be made up of every:

1. person who has asked for company information
2. person who has asked for a quote
3. person who has tried a product/service
4. person who has placed an order
5. person that gave you a referral
6. local promotional company that does not compete in your area of expertise
7. one of your vendors
8. local friend and relative
9. other professional who would likely be in a position to refer clients to you

So, there are many people you would want to follow up with, not just those that are considered to be "clients".

The ultimate objective of keeping in contact with people is to generate more sales and to decrease the cost and time taken to acquire customers. Every entrepreneur when they start a business should build a database to market to, do you have one?

When to Follow Up

Follow up is not just a one time event. Some suggested time lines that work well are:

Immediate contact:

- Follow up after a customer has tried a product
- Follow up after a customer has placed an order
- Follow up after a customer has provided a referral
- Follow up after a customer has attended an event

Two to four weeks contact:

- Follow up on their product or service ordered - are the products working/ any problems, possible exchange, possible repeat orders or complimentary products?
- You can also send information on events, referrals, and special promotions

Two to three months after their initial order follow up on:

- Re-Orders
- Referrals
- Inform them on new products or services, special events and promotions

How can you keep in contact with and stay front of mind with your target customers?

You can also follow up in many different ways. Phone calls, personal mail, flyers via email or real mail, and regular email correspondence are all effective ways to follow up with a client. You want to have a good balance between all areas. Try to use all the methods to keep in contact. You cannot call everyone all the time and you should not email everyone all the time. Email is cheap, but can easily be ignored. Phone calls are direct, but can become time consuming. Real mail is effective, but can be costly. There are positives and negatives to each option. It is important to balance each type to be effective. Here are some great ways to keep in contact with your existing and target customers:

Newsletters

A newsletter must visually promote your distinctive brand. Keep it short, sharing information that will be meaningful to your prospects and clients. If you specialise in electronic promotional products, share tips about what products work best for particular campaigns, or what printing techniques are suitable to each material. Make sure your newsletter contains at least 2 or 3 images of some of your newest work because it's not enough to talk about how creative or great you are; a fabulous picture can help you sell it, especially if you've introduced new concepts or products etc. If nothing else you should be showcasing your expertise and uniqueness. And don't forget to write your newsletter professionally, because great copy writing captures the flavor of your business (hip, traditional, flashy, etc.).

The newsletter should be periodic (1-3 months apart). Give them something new every time. Let people know about new products you are ranging, what the latest trends are, make it seasonal (Christmas, Easter, Halloween, Summer, Winter etc). Tell customers about your people, who they are, their background, likes, dislikes, hobbies and interests. This is a really good way to engage with customers and build barriers to entry against your competitors

- Tell customers about a special promotion or a competition
- Tell customers about a product launch, trade show or end of year party

- Tell customers about holiday opening hours
- Tell customers about changes in personnel, operating hours, service procedures
- Tell customers about industry/market developments

Most people, when they get around to thinking about a company newsletter, simply contact some newsletter company that is going to send out a "generic" newsletter that they will slap their company name onto. This isn't nearly good enough. Worse, sending a newsletter that is boring, as most "generic" newsletters are, actually turns people off, so don't fall into this trap. Keep your newsletters short, sharp, informative, engaging and tailored to your target audience.

How to write a newsletter in just 2 hours: There was a time when I began to dread the newsletter deadline! This meant that I was going to have to carve out some time from my busy schedule and sit down and, if I wanted it to look really personalized, start to write a bunch of articles from scratch. As anyone knows, sitting down at a desk to write with a blank sheet of paper, under time pressure, is a monstrous task that as human beings we want to avoid as much as possible.

I now have a trick that gets the newsletter to practically write itself, and it is very simple. I take a manila folder and write in big letters on the front of it "Future Newsletter Articles". That folder sits on my desk in clear sight. In between issues, anything that comes across my desk that might be an interesting topic for the newsletter gets placed into the folder.

I don't have to do any thinking, sorting, or writing at this time. If I see an interesting article or idea, or I've thought about something that my customers might be interested in I simply place it in the folder.

Now, you might think that even that is hard, because now you always have to be thinking about going out and finding articles to place into your folder. Actually, the opposite is true. The human brain is an amazing thing, once you set up this physical system in your office, articles and ideas just pop up all the time. You don't have to try to remember them and you don't have to write them down anywhere. You just place them into the folder.

When it comes time to write the newsletter, you simply sit down with the folder and re-write the ideas and articles in your own words. You hardly have to think about it or create anything at all! Viola! You now have a four to six page personalised newsletter to mail. Drop in some images, your company logo, contact details and maybe a call to action and e-mail it to your mailing list and it's done (until next month, anyway).

T-Shirts

Send your customers a T-Shirt with your company name on it and a letter asking them to take a photo of themselves outside their business wearing the T-Shirt. You can then post these pictures on your website or company Facebook page. It shows people who is supporting your business and when your customers see themselves in your T-Shirt they are reminded of you. It also creates a connection of partnership between you and your customer.

Similarly if you had an idea about your customers logo and staff uniform design, bite the bullet and surprise them. Even if this is something you have thought of unprompted, get it designed and have a sample made up and sent over to them with a personal note that explains your idea.

Hand Written Notes

Send a hand written note. In today's world of emails, twitter and Facebook we are bombarded with electronic messages. So if you want to stand out from the others, send a hand written note to your customers. The customer is far more likely to stop in their tracks, sit back and read your message making you stand out. As it has had your personal input it will connect with your customer and in turn will give you results.

Greetings Cards

Send your customers personalised birthday cards, christmas cards and more importantly thank you cards for orders received. This is something very simple but very effective. It shows you care about them, appreciate and value their business. I bet your suppliers and competitors are not doing this. How would you feel if your supplier sent you a hand written thank you card for your order or for your birthday? Wouldn't you would think twice about ordering elsewhere next time? Buy a pack of 50 blank cards and have them on your desk, each Friday morning spend 30 minutes writing out thank you's or happy birthday's and simply post them when you grab your lunch later that day. I bet you make an impact!

Thank You

It may be the simplest advice in the world, and you probably think it can't possibly help me get more repeat business, but it does. It is so simple that most businesses forget about it. What is this easy, amazing thing you ask... say "Thank you"! Show your appreciation with a personal phone call, visit or hand written note (not email). Simply saying "thank you", and meaning it goes a long way. Appreciate your customers and they will support you.

Periodic Reviews

Setting up periodic business reviews with your customers is very important. Without structure a year can pass with a customer and you have hardly had the chance to talk to each other about your relationship or direction. The review can be as formal or informal as you like, and it often depends on the type of client. This structured forum is a great opportunity to discuss many issues such as new products, service issues, future innovations, future plans and activities, forecasts, payment terms, deliveries, pricing and so on. To make them effective you must have objectives and an agenda. You should see it as an opportunity to learn more about your customer, how you can serve them better, how you can add value, how you can gain more business and how you can strengthen your businesses relationship.

Market Research Events

A great way to keep in contact with your customers and also help your business is to hold period research events. For example pick a night each month where your customer/s come in and you ask them for feedback on products you are thinking of ranging. You can make it a fun night by putting on refreshments, having a competition and getting everyone in your business involved to get a wide variety of opinions. This night demonstrates that you value your customers opinions, and the feedback they provide can assist you in purchasing products that meet their needs, which reduces your purchasing risks. If putting on a night is too expensive and time consuming then this can also be done online through sites such as Twitter or Facebook. I know one boutique jewelry retailer who uses Twitter to ask people if they like certain items before she buys them. If 50 people say they love it and will buy one she buys 100 units knowing that she is likely to sell half her stock in the first week or two, brilliant!

I think the ages of generic flyers and mailers is dead. We are over marketed in every part of our daily lives so getting your customers attention is not easy. Therefore the personal touch and personal contact is the most effective form of keeping in contact with customers. The time taken to add that personal touch will be far outweighed by the returns you'll get, try it!

Having an attitude that generates loyalty and orders...

How you approach your existing and target customers is critical to your business, your reputation, customer loyalty, growth and profitability. Here are some

things that successful businesses keep front of mind when communicating with their customers:

Q. How can they become critical to the customers business?

A. In addition to outstanding products and service they constantly offer advice, information, help, tools, insights, emotional support, tips and fun. By adding value added service to the customer they are seen as an extension of their customers' business and therefore invaluable.

Q. How can they have an attitude of gratitude and transparency?

A. When they cultivate any business relationship having a thankful attitude is key. To be successful they think about their customers relationships as joint partnerships. They show gratitude to their customers and let them know that they value their business. They are open to learning from their customers and partner with them in joint initiatives to improve both their businesses and strengthen their relationship. In most cases having a thankful attitude brings profitable results.

Q. How can they go the extra mile?

A. Businesses that give a customer more than they asked for or expected will always put a smile on the customer's face and make them come back again. If they have asked for some promotional ideas, don't just give them the ideas, break it down into categories, provide data supporting your ideas, provide images, prices and your recommendations etc

Q. How can they make their customers' life easier?

A. Businesses that focus on making their customers life easier, win. Do you deliver on what you promise? If so offer a guarantee to your customers, then actually do it! If you make life easy for your customers they will come back time and time again.

Summary

There is a fine balance between adding value and staying in regular contact with customers and bombarding them, which is annoying! You have to track who you've sent information to and when, keeping your communications methods varied while sharing interesting and important information that adds value to your customers business. By following this guide you should be able to keep in touch in a smart and respectful way while feeding your sales engine nicely.

If you would like to add to or comment on this article or would like information on developing a complete sales strategy then simply contact Jon Newton author of 'The Sales Manual': www.thesalesmanual.com