

Customer Service That Shines

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Achieve results beyond your wildest expectations with seven top-notch tips.

By Maura Keller

1. Customer service makes your bridal shop truly shine, resulting in repeat business.
1. "If the customer experience is lacking, you will be lacking in customers."
2. "The key to good customer service is training that's consistent and continual."
3. Address each customer by name and stock your waiting room with healthy snacks.
4. The best way to improve your customer service is by surveying former customers.
5. Your customer service strategy should be continually evolving.

Customer service is crucial to your business. If you do it right, you will thrive. If not, you might fail. You can try to control it or it can control you. And for many businesses, both small and large, customer service can be one of their biggest headaches.

The good news? With a little creativity, training and practice, your customer service can make your bridal shop truly shine, resulting in repeat business.

"When you're talking about a retailer in the bridal industry, you're talking about an industry that caters to a customer who has been dreaming about this 'big day' for much of their life," says Donna Cutting, author of "The Celebrity Experience: Insider Secrets to Delivering Red Carpet Customer Service" (Wiley, 2008).

"Many brides have looked forward to their wedding day since they were six or seven years old," Cutting adds. "They have dreamed of every minute as a magical experience, and it is truly their time to receive the star treatment."

Cutting says that a specialty retail shop that gives their customers that kind of magical experience is one that's going to be remembered - and talked about - in a positive light.

"You can have the most beautiful gowns or tuxes in the world, the most lovely decor, and the most heavily traveled location, but if the customer experience is lacking, you will be lacking in customers," she says.

Cutting continues, "Why? Because not only is the bride reveling in every moment...she's talking about every moment, too. Remember, if she's talking about the magical experience she had in your shop, word is going to travel. If she's talking about the horrible experience she had in your shop, word is going to travel even faster."

In fact, the cost of giving poor customer service is astronomical. In addition to losing that one customer, you'll also lose everyone she talks to, as well as the cost of everything you must do to replace her, including marketing and advertising.

Cutting points out that A Harris Interactive Study showed that 80 percent of those surveyed decided never to go back to a company/business because of bad customer service. On the other hand, 60 percent in the same survey cited outstanding service as their reason for recommending a business.

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Indeed. As Michael Brown, a customer service consultant and author of "Fresh Customer Service" (Acanthus Publishing, 2007) points out, customers are not just wanting, they are demanding world-class customer service - especially brides. And they want it now.

"Often time customers are more critical on specialty retailers because it is expected that they should automatically provide a level of customer service that is far better and more value adding than the big-box retailers and chain stores," Brown says.

He continues, "This high expectation is also fostered by the higher prices that generally exist at specialty stores. Customers are willing to shell out the extra bucks, but they certainly want to receive a higher level of customer service."

Making Your Customer Service Work For You

To be competitive, your business must have a solid customer service program. It is as important as having a good product.

In fact, many brides will identify your level of customer service with your company's brand and use it as their guide to differentiate your business from the plethora of other bridal retailers they visit.

"Specialty retailers draw from a smaller market," says Kevin Stirtz, author of "Marketing for Smart People" (Kevin Stirtz, 2005). "Because they 'specialize', not everyone will want or need what they sell at any given moment. So, they need to make a bigger impact with their smaller audience."

Stirtz says the best way to do this is by delivering remarkable service.

"When you give your customer what they want (and more) and you do it in a way that shows you really care about them, you deliver an emotion-laden experience," he says. "When something has an emotional impact on us, we remember it longer and we think about and talk about it more."

So by delivering a great experience, Stirtz continues, you are creating a positive emotional memory for your customers that they're more likely to retain and talk about. This is important because obviously, you want to make sure people only have good things to say about your bridal store.

One of the first steps to take is determining your company's customer service objectives. They might be one of the following: increase sales, maintain positive relationships, persuade new customers, or establish a market position. You also need to understand your competition's level of customer service and be ready to adjust.

"The key to good customer service is training. And the key to training is to make it consistent and continual," Cutting says. "When you look at the companies and retailers that are known for giving red-carpet customer service, you will note that training for their employees is paramount."

Another thing businesses with excellent customer service have in common is that they are very clear as to who they are as a company.

"They know what their mission, values and standards are, and they put their mission, values and standards in front of their employees constantly," Cutting says. "They will talk about them in stand-up meetings, they make decisions based on their mission, values and standards, and they

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make sure that each employee understands how to express the mission, values and standards within the context of their job."

Top Customer Service Techniques

While creating a solid customer service program does not happen overnight, there are some simple techniques you can implement that will make immediate improvements to your customers' experience.

1. Create a memorable experience each time they visit your store. Take a tip from Rodeo Drive: make shopping an event! Women wait their whole lives for this day, and shopping for the dress is part of the fun. Make their experience memorable by finding unique ways to roll out the red carpet. Try addressing each customer by name, offering VIP parking and having a waiting room stocked with coffee, water and healthy snacks.
2. Create an exceptional work environment. Brown recommends that you not only focus on your customers, but also on your employees.

"Specialty retailers, especially bridal shops, must empower and equip the frontline employee with the tools necessary to deliver and execute the world-class experience that was intended for the bride to experience," Brown says.

He continues, "Far too often we are putting powerless people on the frontline and leaving them to be beat up by customers. This does nothing for your customer experience or the moral of your frontline employees. Unhappy frontline employees deliver unhappy results to the bottom line. If you take care of the employees first, they will take care of the customer and the bottom line will take care of itself."

3. Cater to the entourage. Remember this is "Mom's Day", too. Create unique ways to make the mother-of-the-bride feel special. Offer a "Mother-of-the-Bride" tip booklet or give her a framed photo of herself and her daughter shopping. Think about other people who might show up with the bride and make their days special, too. It might be something to keep children occupied, or special magazines for men in the waiting room.

¥ Commit to WOW! "Specialty retailers can really stand out from the packing by coming up with strategies that will truly 'wow' their customers and get them talking," Cutting says.

Some ideas? Reserved parking, personalized gifts, overnight service, last-minute emergency service, personalized welcome signs for expected customers, bridal stress release kits and annual anniversary cards.

"Write an old-fashioned handwritten thank-you note and make a follow-up call to ask how the experience was," Cutting says. "Retailers can mentally think through every little aspect of their customers experience and come up with ways to 'wow' the shopper at every turn."

4. Partner with other suppliers. Often brides are overwhelmed with everything planning a wedding entails. Go beyond the business card table and partner with other wedding suppliers to be a resource for everything your customers could possibly need.

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5. Celebrate your customers. Turn them into stars by putting their autographed wedding photos on your walls.

6. Survey former customers. Stirtz says that the best way to improve your customer service is by surveying former customers. This means setting up a system to connect with customers and ask them two simple questions: what was your experience like, and how can we improve our service?

This can be done by phone, by mailing in a paper form or online.

"Another (complementary) method is to create a system where your customers and employees monitor the service customers receive," Stirtz says. "Make it easy for them to offer honest feedback and give them an incentive for doing so. With employees, you might have a weekly 'remarkable service award' and recognize people for doing a great job."

7. Finally, publish your customer service standards.

"Make sure your employees and your customers know what your customer service standards are," Stirtz says. "Put them on wall posters, put them on the back of business cards - anywhere customers and employees will see them."

Delivering On Your Vision

While many companies recognize the importance of customer service, and are able to design great experiences, they often lack the discipline necessary to consistently execute them. To be successful, a company needs to define the experience, create the appropriate tools, train its staff and measure the plan's impact on the customer.

For example, last year Stirtz saw an advertising campaign from a local bank. The ads focused on how great the customer service was at this bank. It used silly exaggeration to make their point.

"The problem was, as a customer, I never felt I received this service. I even asked a few employees about it. Their response was it was just another ad campaign with nothing behind it," Stirtz says.

About the same time, Stirtz saw a series of ads from a local hospital. They also talked about how great (and caring) their service was. These ads were more subtle and professional in their tone.

"During this campaign, my mother was in this hospital and she experienced their service," he says. "It was great. It was caring. She was very impressed - and she is not easily impressed."

When Stirtz thinks of these two companies, he thinks of the bank as being less than genuine.

"They told me something and then failed to deliver, on multiple occasions," he says. "On the other hand, the hospital is on a pedestal. They told me they care and then they delivered in numerous ways."

He continues, "Using your marketing to promote how good your service is only works if your service is consistently better than what your marketing promises. Every customer has to experience your remarkable service. When you do this - like the hospital did - it can pay huge dividends in goodwill, word of mouth marketing and customer loyalty. But, if you don't do it well, it can cause more damage than anything else."

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Remember, your customer service strategy should be continually evolving. By striving to take the continuing pulse of your marketplace, creating your own scenario of the ideal customer experience, and revising your strategy accordingly, you will help maximize your profits and improve your store's memorability in your customers' minds.

"In this age of chain expansion, a customer can find your services duplicated or your products cheaper on the next block," Brown says. "The one way you can differentiate yourself in a sea of similar competition is by offering a world-class customer service experience."

Common Customer Service Mistakes To Avoid

Donna Cutting, author of "The Celebrity Experience: Insider Secrets to Delivering Red Carpet Customer Service" (Wiley, 2008), offers the following insights into customer service tendencies that all retailers should avoid.

¥ The "Are You Anybody?" syndrome. One major movie star's assistant told Cutting that he will go into the shops at Rodeo drive dressed in jeans, a T-shirt and baseball cap. The retailers snub him. Then, they find out who he works for and are all over him, offering wine and gifts. Other "everyday people" Cutting interviewed have had similar experiences in many different shops. The take-home lesson: You may be missing out on huge sales (or wasting time on a dead-end) by judging somebody based on looks.

¥ Not acknowledging the groom. Don't assume the groom doesn't have an opinion. Just like women don't like to be ignored when they take their cars to the shop, most men also want some input on the tux they're going to wear. Speak to both parties, not just the bride.

¥ Not acknowledging every customer. When Cutting interviews people about their poor customer service experiences, this theme comes up every single time. The customer stands there waiting to be acknowledged and the clerk has their head in some paperwork, is on the phone, or is staring at the computer screen. Even if you're busy, simply look up, smile and acknowledge the customer's presence. Then let them know exactly when you will be able to help them.

¥ Stalking like the paparazzi. Be there, be available, but also give your customers space and time to have personal conversations with their loved ones about the gowns or accessories they're looking at. Don't feel the need to comment on every single item.

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