

Maintaining excellence to beat the “Five Year Curse.”

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“A page you liked has changed its name.”

That headline brought my afternoon Facebook scroll to a screeching halt last week. The unfamiliar name led me to the page in question, where I found that one of my favorite locally owned coffee shops was changing hands.

I was somewhat saddened, but not fully surprised. The consistency of the product they delivered (along with their level of customer service) had decreased greatly in the past year. In the business’ infancy, at least one of the two owners was behind the bar every time I stopped in to grab my decaf oat milk mocha caramel latte. For most of that first year, I could rest assured my morning treat would taste the same every time I walked out of their door.

Likewise, the owners and the baristas that worked alongside them seemed to truly care about their customers and were passionate about the product they sold. They recognized my voice when I called in an order on rushed mornings, and they knew what I was most likely going to ask for when I stepped up to the counter without ordering ahead. Many mornings the cardboard sleeve on my cup would even have a small illustration and a whimsically lettered personalized message on it.

I, no doubt like many of their other regular customers, felt seen and authentically appreciated. I liked knowing what to expect when I walked through the door. The cafe wasn’t any cheaper than a larger chain like Starbucks, but the experience as a whole (and the consistently delicious coffee) appealed to me far more.

As the business moved into their second year, I started to notice little things slipping. My latte didn’t always taste the same, and the frequency of that occurrence began to increase. My mobile orders (always placed well in advance and accompanied by a tip for the baristas’ time) were sometimes not ready when I arrived. The owners were rarely there when I stopped in, replaced instead by staff that sometimes seemed unenthusiastic about being there and at other times appeared to simply be poorly trained. The bad experiences began to outnumber the good, and I eventually slipped back into the status of an occasional customer instead of a three to four day per week “regular.” Based on the continual changes in business hours and other factors, I wasn’t the only one who did so.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics has reported that one in five businesses do not survive their first year of business, and almost half don’t make it to the five year mark. The coffee shop had been open for approximately two years. Their regression followed a pattern that I’ve seen

numerous businesses I enjoyed patronizing experience prior to closing before (or close to) that five year mark.

Most of these businesses started out strong. The owners took a very hands-on approach early on, during which time the quality of their product (as well as their customer service) was at its peak. Perhaps in the beginning business wasn't exactly booming, so they had plenty of time to devote to nurturing relationships with customers and providing them with an experience that enticed them to refer their friends and family. They set the bar high-and that's a good thing, right?

It can be. But when business picks up and the owners must continue to add members to their team (or work harder themselves) to meet the demand, they must continue to meet that same standard of excellence. I would even argue that maintaining that standard may be more important than setting the bar high initially.

Look at it this way-relationships, whether it be a romantic relationship, a friendship, or otherwise, have a hard time thriving when we abandon everything we did to cultivate them in the beginning. Every action, big or small, taken to nourish a new relationship sets expectations. When we get comfortable and those expectations begin to be met less and less, we run the risk of jeopardizing that particular relationship.

As business owners, we build relationships with our customers. What we do in the first six months to a year sets the tone for how our customers expect future transactions to play out. When business seems to finally be "good" and our profits have become steady (or are even growing at a rate we didn't expect), that is not the time to become lax. We can't simply throw the reins to a team of employees, start looking for ways to cut costs to increase revenue at the expense of our product or service's quality, and hope that our business will continue to grow while we simply make bank deposits. We have to take that standard we set for our customers in the beginning and aspire to exceed it.

Don't become a victim of the five year curse. Do the work. Set the bar high, then look for ways to go above and beyond in every single interaction you have with a customer. It may not be a foolproof plan for avoiding failure, but it's certain to have some sort of positive impact on the longevity of your business.