

# 7 Ways to Keep Customers Coming Back

By  
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Lots of money, effort and time go into acquiring customers, but not nearly enough thought goes into keeping them coming back. Sure, there's the occasional offer or the "We've missed you" discount. All too frequently, we don't pay attention unless they're unhappy or turn up missing. Then, we get busy and try to get them back.

Such business behavior has unintended consequences. The cable companies are an example. Customers have learned to complain and threaten to leave unless they are given concessions. And how do you feel when a company unleashes the sweet talk after they haven't heard from you? This is when you say, "Why didn't you take care of me *before* I left?"

Sure, there are so-called loyalty programs. But their track record is spotty. At the moment, Macy's appears to be having some success. But today's customers are always alert for the next "best deal." And it's not just retail, it's everywhere.

Whatever the business, the barriers to making a change are crumbling, as a recent Capitol One TV ad depicts so graphically. No matter where they are, it only takes 5 minutes to change, viewers are told.

Customers get it. Nothing holds them back. "I really like doing business with you, but I'm making a change," they say. Many businesses pass it off as just the way it is today; few have a clue what to do about it.

So, let's get specific as to why customers leave. Sure, some move, die, and experience lifecycle changes. Even so, there are forces at work that disrupt customer relationships:

1. *Some are easily bored.* They constantly prowl the Internet for what's new and different, which one survey pegs as between one and three hours a day just at work.
2. *Others lose interest almost instantly.* Studies indicate attention spans are getting shorter—and shorter. You may recall a Canadian media consumption survey by Microsoft that found the average attention span was eight seconds in 2015, down from 12 seconds in 2000.
3. *Many don't get the help they expect,* particularly with decision making. A patient in a medication ad wonders if what he's taking is the best for him. He wants the

best so he talks to his doctor and makes a change. We're confused after poring over online reviews and items with Amazon and "Best Seller" grabs our attention.

4. *Feel they're being taken for granted.* They place orders, pay on time, and don't complain. Sounds like the perfect customer. And then they're gone. Why? They feel neglected—and chances are they're right.

Is there a common thread running through the list? If anything, it shows how fragile customer relationships are today. It doesn't take much to harm them, but it does take effort to strengthen them. Here are ways to do it:

1. *Communicate value.* Of course, customers chase the lowest price for auto insurance. They view it the same way they buy milk or bread and a lot of other stuff. Keep the attention directed on why what you sell makes a difference in your customers' lives.
2. *Focus on the front line.* Person-to-person contact is the weakest point in most businesses. It ranges from lack of attention and inaccurate information to surliness, being ignored, and lied to. Like it or not, this *is* the company. It's the place of truth, no matter what the CEO says.
3. *Act on feedback.* Whether a business wants feedback or not, they get it today, often from many directions. Encouraging feedback should be a company's primary message, not tacked on somewhere: "We want to be better. We depend on you to show us how." Then let customers know how they helped.
4. *Make messaging personal.* Customer must feel that the business experience is about them. Too much is either too general, inappropriate, or what you want customers to buy. Forget it. It doesn't work and that means it wastes time and money. To do it right takes data.
5. *Customize loyalty rewards.* Everyone isn't moved by a singular incentive. Give them options so the decision is theirs. Sure, it's more complicated, but a key to loyalty is recognizing customers as partners.
6. *Listen to their story.* Email, text, telephone, letter. Share complaints and what you've done about them; show how complaints make a better company. Customers want to talk about their situation
7. *Do something special.* Surprise them. Let them know you noticed them. A few days after having brunch at a restaurant, the manager emailed a guest. He said they were pleased to prepare the meal to meet dietary restrictions.

Now, here's the point. Just as a thread runs through the reasons why customer leave, there's also a thread that helps explain why they stay: *They feel appreciated, understood, and wanted, not just when they come aboard, but consistently over time.*

Is a retention effort worth it? "The companies that have a difficult time," says Wharton researcher Dan McCarthy, "are the ones that don't do a good job of retaining the customers. They are never able to dial back on customer acquisition, which makes it very hard for them to get out of that loss-making situation."

In summary, we can say that just as customer acquisition is habit-forming, so is customer retention.

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