

## Without Customer Trust Nothing Else Matters

By  
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When the contractor didn't deliver the proposal as promised, the homeowner called to find out when to expect it. "Sorry about that," was the reply. "You'll have it later today or tomorrow." When it arrived, what passed for a proposal was a "cost estimate" and a hand-drawn layout lacking specifics. It appeared to have been dashed off on the way over. The contractor came recommended, but the homeowner chose another company due to a lack of trust.

Hands down, customer experience is today's #1 marketing hot issue—and for good reason. Up to 82% of customers who leave do so because of a bad experience. While businesses keep trying to plug up the customer experience holes, it's never enough.

There's a lesson here: it's over and done if trust isn't established as early as possible. Without a reservoir of goodwill available to recover from a bad customer experience, customers bail.

Even though winning sales is the goal, the first objective is winning customer trust. Credibility matters since the doubt meter is always running with prospects and customers. This is why bulletproofing customer relationships is the number one task. Today's customers don't automatically trust brands, businesses, or salespeople. It's earned by actions, experience, and attitudes that develop over time. And here are ways to establish it:

**Follow through.** When contacting a business, a lack of follow through may be customers' greatest fear. Allay their worries by acknowledging how they feel: "*I know how important this is to you... I'll be back to you about 3:00 pm today.*" or "You have my word...but should you want to contact me here's my email address and cell number."

**Solve problems fast.** "Will-they-or-won't-they take care of it?" is what every customer is thinking when they have a problem. What they're looking for is a clue as how a business will respond. Surprise them by letting them know you understand and will take care of it now. If you can't do it, change the policy!

**Be candid.** "Why didn't you tell me?" are words no salesperson wants to hear from a customer. It happens because there's often a wide gulf between what customers think they want to buy and what's going to best serve their needs. To assure satisfaction be candid with them to make sure they will be satisfied.

**Encourage feedback.** Companies may say they want to hear from their customers, but make it difficult, at times nearly impossible, to do so. If you're serious about getting feedback, make it easy for customers to contact you and then respond promptly.

**Personalize content.** And not by dropping in the customer's name a couple of times. Imagine having a cup of coffee with someone and keep that picture in your mind as you write. It's how you say it—with empathy, openness and understanding that makes it personal.

**Make relevant recommendations.** Let customers know you "get it" by giving them specific ideas and suggestions that fit them. General offers have a negative effect; they make customers feel you don't know them.

**Test ideas and initiatives first.** Before making changes affecting customers ask them to comment and express their views. Don't bother if you're afraid you'll learn something you don't want to hear. Taking customers into your confidence avoids mistakes—and creates trust.

**Respond quickly.** When customers contact businesses today, they either don't expect a response or assume it will take a day or longer. This is no way to build trust. Response Rule: best within 15 minutes...repeat, within 15 minutes.

**Acknowledge mistakes.** Desensitize tense situations by offering an apology and do it in a way so customers know you care—and not just trying to appease them. Then, resolve it to the customer's satisfaction.

**Keep your promises.** Many "one star" customer comments, those that inflame customers the most, have to do with "broken promises." Solution: do what you said you would do when you said you would do it. If you don't, be prepared to suffer the customer's wrath! In their mind, you have disrespected them.

**Give meaning to "valued customer."** These two words are useless unless they translate into value for customers. Examples: a higher credit limit, loyalty options, a direct phone number, an assigned CSR, or some special service.

**Find out what they expect.** Even though trust is the critical component of customer relationships, its meaning can be highly individual. To avoid customer dissatisfaction and disappointment, ask them what they expect from you.

**Be up front.** Bad customer experiences make consumers wary and doubtful. They've heard it all before so they're ready to do battle when someone says, "We put customers first." Being transparent in dealing with customers helps boost their trust.

Is it worth the effort to build customer trust? It is if you believe that new customers come with built-in skepticism, waiting for the other shoe to fall. This won't change unless trust is the basis of the customer relationship.

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