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WorkWise: It takes two to meet a customer's needs

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Losing a single customer in this economy might undermine your job security. Watch for signs that you and everyone around you are letting customers slip away. Then buck the trend.

Liz Kislik, president of Liz Kislik Associates LLC, in Rockville Centre, N.Y., details three signs of unhappy customers: declining sales and revenue from the top ten percent of customers; an expanding call-to-sale ratio or customer resistance to buying; and increased customer problems.

You might be able to predict these problems using a method of Nathaniel Williams, President and CEO of HumanWorks Affiliates Inc., in Bethlehem, Pa. Watch for employees who don't view their work, he says, as "an extension of something they believe in, the company's principles and mission."

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Are you really supporting customers? Reread the company's mission statement to remind yourself of the values that drew you to the company. Next, look at how you interact with customers. Renee Evenson, author of "Customer Service Training 101," 2nd ed., considers asking well-timed, targeted questions critical (AMACOM, \$22.95). She also writes that "listening carefully may be considered the most important component in effective communication." Check to see if you're on automatic, anticipating questions and statements from customers. She further cautions, "Before answering a customer's question, make sure you understand it," and recommends giving "a thorough explanation." Just don't overwhelm the person with information or technical terms.

Diane Marentette, co-founder of The New Brain for Business Institute in La Jolla, Calif., advocates digging deeply to make certain you identify the need in front of you, whether remedial or tied to the person's aspirations. "If it's remedial," she says, "help them feel safe. If it has to do with aspiration, work with them to paint a picture of the future they want. Miss the distinction at the outset and you might lose the connection that will help you provide the best for your customer."

Williams mentions that "there is nothing too small in the customer experience. Do whatever you can do to (make it memorable)."

FEEDBACK

Keep your ear to the ground for customer feedback. Ask customers about their experiences. If they're not happy, ask them what it would take to change that. You might not be able to meet that need, but if you lose the customer, the fact that you know why should help you later.

Williams says that the best people to approach aren't the ones who are outwardly happy or unhappy, but those in the middle: "They provide more valuable information and nuances of the relationship and experience," he observes. "Because they don't feel overly strong and may feel detached, they provide room for the most growth. Don't take them for granted."

Either way, take the customer feedback and use it. "Many companies give lip-service to the idea of service," says Kislik. "Companies that want to improve (do). The others may not notice as the ground is being cut out from under them."

Moving the information forward may be difficult in call centers, because telephone transfers might not be possible, and transferring to corporate offices from a retail environment is also difficult, Kislik mentions. She recommends customer e-mailing, writing in or tweeting. Of course, if you're truly courageous, suggest that the customer call on his own.

If customers are walking away from your company, assess your own role in their exodus. It might help you with your next customer and it might help keep your job.



Nathaniel Williams, president and CEO of Bethlehem, Pa. HumanWorks Affiliates Inc., studies trend reports with a staffing company owner to forecast the seasonal staffing needs of current customers. - Jeff Tintle -

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