

Gain customer loyalty and keep your regulars for life

Long-standing customers form the backbone of a strong, well-established business. Make it your mission to ensure that the vast majority of your current customers stay with your business for many years to come.

Why it's vital to keep existing customers

Your current customers already have personal experiences of dealing with your business and using its products or services. You won't need to spend much time, money and energy convincing them to continue buying from you.

You and your staff know your current customers well. They're likely to increase the amount (or the frequency) of their purchases, and recommend your business to others if you:

- Solve their problems.
- Meet their needs.
- Exceed their expectations.

It costs between four and ten times more to win a new customer than to keep a current customer, according to the US Chartered Institute of Marketing. Therefore, it's important to implement outstanding customer service to convert occasional customers into loyal, long-standing regulars.

Communicate consistently and manage expectations

Let your customers know what they can expect from your business, including timescales. For example, if you own a supermarket, make sure your customer service is excellent by helping people in-store and at the checkout.

Ensure emails are clear

Set up email templates for frequent types of communications, such as emails informing customers of special deals or upcoming events.

Show your customers you appreciate them

You can show your customers you appreciate them in many different ways, including:

- Thanking them for each purchase.
- Giving them a voucher so they save money on their next purchase.
- Introducing a loyalty card that guarantees a free item after a certain number of purchases have been made.
- Inviting them to a special event such as a food show, a re-launch party, or a VIP customer evening.

Develop customer service standards

Develop customer service standards for your business. You could utilize some of the following guidelines as a basis for your business's customer service standards. Try to:

- Be polite, helpful, and friendly to your customers at all times.
- Respond to emails as quickly as possible, preferably within three hours but within a maximum of 24 hours.
- Listen carefully to questions and requests so that you can offer the most appropriate help or advice.
- Let customers know immediately if there's an unexpected delay in processing their order.

Train your employees in customer service

Everyone in your business who will have any kind of contact with customers should be trained in customer services.

Use your business's customer service standards as a basis for your training. Ensure that staff know exactly what's expected of them whenever they interact with customers.

Deal with customer complaints effectively

Regard each customer complaint as an opportunity rather than an annoyance. If a customer complains, it shows they still care. This gives you an opportunity to handle the complaint well.

Steps to take when a customer complains

Train your staff members to take a series of steps whenever a customer complains. They should:

- Listen carefully to what the customer is saying. Understand exactly what they're complaining about and why.
- Admit any mistakes that your business has made and apologize to the customer.
- Make amends quickly. If necessary, ask the customer what they would like you to do to remedy the situation.
- Promise to do better next time.

Test and improve your business's customer service

There are several ways to find out how well your staff are handling their customer service duties, including:

- Mystery shopping. Mystery shoppers will give you honest and objective feedback on what it feels like to be a customer of your business.
- Customer satisfaction surveys. A market research company can carry out a customer satisfaction survey, asking your customers for the positive and negative aspects of doing business with you.
- Asking customers for feedback on how your business could improve its customer services.
- Inviting your staff to suggest how your business could treat its customers better.

Use all these ideas to develop and extend your customer service skills. Ensure each employee has on-going training.

Exceed customer expectations

You'll keep customers for life if you exceed their expectations. Ways you can exceed your customers' expectations include:

- Delivering an exceptionally good product or service.
- Responding quickly to all customer questions, requests, complaints, and other communications.
- Training all your staff in excellent customer service skills.
- Managing all aspects of a transaction efficiently, from the sale to the delivery, to invoicing.
- Dealing with complaints quickly and effectively.
- Delivering on your promises. Never promise anything that your business can't deliver.

It's far less expensive to keep an existing customer than to win a new customer. Recognize the value of your customer base and invest in building an exceptional customer experience that will ensure your customers return for many years to come.