

Seven Tips for Turning Your Customers into Fans for Life

Make your customers LOVE you!

No matter what industry or profession you're in, there are tons of ways to win over your customers and create brand loyalists who keep coming back. Below are a few easy-to-implement ideas that will help you turn any customer into a fan for life. And though these tips address specific professions and businesses, keep in mind that great customer service translates across industries. Carefully consider each of them and think about how you can modify them to improve the service you provide your customers:

Offer flexible office hours. If you're an attorney, financial advisor, or other professional whose clients are small business owners or any other busy business-type, you might consider offering to meet with them on evenings or Saturdays rather than during regular business hours. In doing so, you show them that you understand the time they spend with their business is essential and make it easier for them to do business with you.

Handle problems quickly. This is especially important for hotels and other hospitality services. Understand that your guests don't need you when everything is going as planned. It's when something goes wrong that they need great customer service to right their proverbial ship. When you're presented with a guest's problem, provide solutions on the spot.

"For example, if a busy guest's luggage zipper breaks, what can you do to help?" says Kuzmeski. "Well, you might offer a coupon for a new piece of luggage from the hotel's store. Keep spare luggage on hand for guests with a problem. Or simply offer to tape the luggage shut to ensure it makes it home safely. Figure out what you can do to get it right when something is going wrong for your guests, and they will keep coming back."

Show them what you've got...before the big day. If you are a caterer, baker, florist, wedding planner, or any other professional who helps plan the most important or special days of your clients' lives, always give them an unexpected taste of what you have to offer before the big day. For example, a wedding caterer might show up at the bride's house a week before the wedding with a sampling of hors d'oeuvres. Or a florist might send the happy couple a bouquet of flowers two weeks in advance. By doing so, you show your clients that you care about them and also give them a preview of the great service you'll provide on the big day.

Offer friendlier skies (and waiting rooms). Many people today view airports, and flying in

general, as the places where all great customer service goes to die. In fact, often you can walk up to a ticket counter or onto a plane and never even have the airline employee make eye contact. If you work for an airline, know that many travelers today would just like to be acknowledged. Show your customers you're happy they chose to fly with you. The same holds true, of course, for any business in any industry.

“Medical office reception areas can also sometimes be low on great customer service,” says Kuzmeski. “Their busy employees usually have to look at a computer most of the day, and they are trying to cycle patients through as quickly as possible. But by doing something as easy as making eye contact and smiling, you can begin to alleviate a sick patient’s stress—or in the case of the airline, a passenger’s travel worries.”

Fix it first. This one goes out to anyone who has ever gotten their freshly dry-cleaned clothes back only to find that a button has broken off of their favorite blouse or dress shirt. Or who has gotten their car back from the repair shop only to have another problem a week later. If you are a dry cleaner, fix the button—at no charge—before your customers pick up their clothing items. By doing so, you eliminate what could become a huge inconvenience for them and ensure they won’t have any qualms about bringing their next round of dry cleaning to your business.

For car repair shops, contact your clients if you see that there is something else wrong (or that could soon be wrong) with their car. Ask if they would like for you to go and ahead and fix it and offer a discount on your labor time. It is a great way to build goodwill in an industry where there is a lot of competition.

Provide worth-the-wait service, without the wait. For doctors, hospitals, veterinarians, or other medical service providers, a wonderful way to win the love of your patients is to ensure short wait times and flexible appointment times. For example, one hospital ER in Florida sponsors a billboard that shows its wait time in LCD real-time—as well as the ER wait times at other local hospitals. The sponsoring hospital has significantly lower times. By doing so, they show their patients that they understand wait time is a huge concern, and that most people fear they’ll end up spending hours and hours sitting in the waiting room if they ever have to go to the ER.

This tactic could easily be modified by other businesses where long waits are often a customer deterrent—for example, “big box” chains and popular grocery stores, phone companies like Verizon and AT&T (where the transactions take a long time), or at coffee shops that want to show they have short waits during the morning rush. Or you can do this on a smaller scale in your own medical office or small business by having your staff let clients/patients know exactly how long it will be before they can be seen.

“Obviously, the shorter the wait time the better, but by providing patients or clients with the wait length, you can show that you haven’t simply accepted that long wait times come with the territory at hospitals, medical offices, and some businesses,” says Kuzmeski. “Show them that you don’t think it’s okay if they have to wait a while to be seen, and that you understand that people want and deserve better.”

Give it away for free. Vistaprint, a global printing company, made jaw-dropping value their hallmark. They did so by offering 250 business cards for free, with a nominal \$5.67 shipping and processing charge, to appeal to their target market: cost-conscious small businesses. Today, 66 percent of Vistaprint’s business comes from returning customers. In the first quarter of 2010 alone, they acquired 1.4 million new customers—many who started with a free order.

“Offering freebies might also be a great way to get customers into a new restaurant or boutique,” suggests Kuzmeski. “Give first-time customers a free appetizer or special discount—along with great service, of course!—and they will be happy to recommend more first-timers and to come back for more themselves.”