

## **Ask SCORE**

*I run a small, independent tax preparation service. Though my competition is the large, well-known national chains, I can't compete on price. However, I offer more personal service and individual attention to my clients. What can I do to retain my clients and communicate the benefits of doing business with us?*

Much has been written about the erosion of customer loyalty, and how cost-conscious buyers are putting a higher priority on price.

Fortunately, the repeat customer is far from becoming an endangered species. But in today's highly competitive environment, you need to do everything possible to ensure that relationships with your customers don't end at the point-of-sale.

"You need to give your customers something of extra value if you want them to return," says international hospitality consultant Linda Novey-White. "Look at your business like a customer would. What could you be doing better, and what is your competition doing better?"

Start by anticipating your customer's needs. Think ahead to what the market will be demanding in the coming months and determine what you can do better. Also keep abreast of trends that may influence your customers' purchasing decisions. They may alert you to the need to modify your offerings to respond to new regulatory requirements, or changes in preferred styles and formats.

You can also gain insights into customer needs simply by asking and, more importantly, listening. Too many businesses take it upon themselves to advertise the next big thing without considering whether their customers want it or not. And while everybody wants a good price, they want a good value even more. Listening to and acting on your customers' needs and concerns will make a lasting impression on even the most meticulous comparison shopper.

Adding a personal touch will also forge a stronger bond between you and your customers. Casual conversations will yield important information such as birthdays, professional accomplishments and family events that you can recognize with a card or other low-cost token of appreciation. Everyone appreciates a helpful reminder in this busy world, and a message about an upcoming event such as change in tax rates or a new industry requirement will cement your reputation as a go-to source for more than just your product or service.

It's also helpful to regularly share news about your products or services, and the issues that affect their use. You can do this on your website, or via a customer e-newsletter. Just make sure your customers specifically request to be on your mailing list.

Finally, make sure you deliver what you promise. "Too many people offer hype and then don't follow through," Novey-White says. "Delivering a product or service that disappoints is the fastest way to lose your customers."

*This column is brought to you by the Southern New Hampshire Chapter of SCORE, with more than 65 current and former business executives available to provide free, confidential, one-on-one business counseling and training workshops for area*

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*Have a question you'd like answered in this column? E-mail it to [info@score199.mv.com](mailto:info@score199.mv.com), with "Ask SCORE" in the subject line.*