

Ask SCORE

I've owned a decorating store (paint, wallpaper, window coverings, etc.) for more than ten years. Though we're operating at a profit, it's getting harder and harder to compete against the large home improvement retailers. Am I fighting what is inevitably a losing battle?

Size isn't everything, especially when it comes to providing value to customers.

This important fact can help distinguish small “mom and pop” businesses from big box chain stores. It gives them a powerful competitive advantage in an age when more consumers crave and expect a high level of service and responsiveness.

Your position at the “front lines” of your business gives you direct access to your customers' needs, attitudes and opinions. You know the kinds of products or services they want, when they want them and how best to deliver them.

To gain these valuable insights, you need to proactively assess what you do and should be doing to keep customers coming back, rather than tempting them to try the “big store” down the street.

Start by putting yourself in your customers' place. How would you like to be treated if you were a first-time customer or a “regular”? Also consider conveniences. What can you do to make it easier to find items and check out, rather than having to navigate a big-box store's aisles and cashier lines?

Also visit other stores and service centers, including those unrelated to your business. See what they do that you find appealing, and adapt those practices to enhance your business's customer experience. Similarly, watch for aspects you don't like, but be sure to understand the reasons behind problems or poor service, such as understaffing and limited inventory. This will help prevent similar problems from arising in your business.

How you connect with customers by phone or e-mail will also help differentiate your small business from the sometimes bureaucratic nature of big-box chains. Answer calls promptly and with a friendly greeting. Avoid putting callers on hold for longer than a minute; take a message and respond as soon as possible. If you use an automated answering system, your customer service line should be one of the first options.

Although it may be impractical to handle e-mail inquiries as they arrive, don't let them sit for too long. Some e-mail systems automatically generate a response to acknowledge the message. Make sure the text is upbeat and friendly—again, the kind of message you'd want to receive. A promise to respond within 24 hours may not be enough. Designate certain times during the day to handle e-mail queries, or assign the responsibility to an employee.

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 businesses. Call 603-666-7561 or visit www.score-manchester.org for information on counseling, upcoming workshops and volunteer opportunities. SCORE is a national, non-profit organization and a resource partner of the U. S. Small Business Administration.

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