

Challenges and opportunities for SMEs- PART 3

CUSTOMERS AND SERVICE

A series of practical articles by Chris Elphick, Breadfruit Consulting.

During this series I am looking at a number of issues relevant to all SMEs and identify both the opportunities and challenges associated with each issue. Topics to be covered include planning; staff and recruitment; customers and service; marketing; competition; new products and services; being well organised; collaborating with others; understanding and analysing risk; managing the money; going into business with family or friends; grants, loans and investment; expansion and growth; technology and exporting.

Today my focus is on customers and service.

No business, however small, can do without customers. They are the business – no customers, no money, no business! Delivering excellent customer service is what keeps them coming to you and encourages them to tell others about you.

One of the challenges faced by many businesses is when we take our customers for granted – we see them as a source of money rather than a relationship to build. Building strong relationships with your customers is one of the best things you can do to secure the future of your business. Look at them, talk to them, take an interest in them and, above all, thank them!

Good customer service requires businesses to spend time with their customers – this might mean stopping what you are doing when they enter your shop or premises and focus on them. It is essential to drop everything for the customer. Providing excellent service is much more than smiling and being friendly – business owners must make sure their staff are properly trained so that when asked a question they can deal with it. It is very annoying for a customer when a staff member says, ‘sorry I don’t know – I’ll go and get someone’. This is frustrating and time consuming and is unnecessary if staff are properly trained.

Looking after your customers is an essential element of ALL businesses! Recently I was queuing in a bank somewhere in the Pacific reading the poster on the wall which proclaimed the Bank’s vision and values – all about good customer service. Yet at the same time the queue was getting longer and longer while bank staff behind did other things – only one

person was serving. If they had all dropped everything for the customer the queue would have disappeared very quickly, and all customers would have been very happy!

Delivering consistently good customer focused service is challenging to all businesses – it takes time, it requires us to train our staff well, it means we always have to prioritize customers, even when we don't feel like it! But the opportunities are enormous. Imagine getting a reputation for always delivering great service. You will soon have many new customers.

Customers talk to other people, whether they have had a good or bad experience, and of course with today's social media they can be talking to many people very quickly. For example, if you are in the tourism business, comments posted on trip adviser will reach a huge potential market very quickly.

To make the most of the opportunities that good customer service provides you must:

- Recruit new staff who like customers
- Train staff well and properly
- Give your staff the tools and information they need to deal with customer queries
- Make sure you and all your staff always put the customer first
- Have regular meetings to discuss customer issues
- Never say I can't – find a way to help them even if it means sending them to a competitor.
- Make your business customer friendly – rubbish free, places to sit, water, comfort
- Find a way to get customer feedback – if they have a complaint it is much better they tell you than others!
- Always greet your customers, even if you are busy with someone else.
- Always thank them for coming
- Never make promises you can't keep! It is always tempting to promise something that you think looks good to the customer, but it has to be realistic. Unkept promises lead to dissatisfied customers.

Remember that customers pay your bills and keep your businesses going – whatever the challenges they must always be your number one priority.

If you need help with customer service or you want some feedback on your own practices, then please get in touch. Happy customers in 2018!!

Chris Elphick is Partner in Breadfruit Consulting, supporting the development of a range of businesses and organisations in Melanesia and other parts of the Pacific. He is an experienced trainer, coach and business mentor and has years of experience of working with Small & Medium Enterprises. He and his partner Hazel Kirkham live in Vanuatu.

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