

By Mary Lou Denny

About the Author

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# Expand

**W**ant to leave your competitors standing at the starting gate?

Develop a reputation for outstanding customer service. While persuasive advertising, favorable public relations, impressive sales promotions and an informative website are all important parts of the marketing mix, the final component of successful marketing is getting the customer to promote you through word-of-mouth.

Outstanding customer service will get your customers to start singing your praises. And the key is not just to satisfy your customers, but to delight them enough that they will refer you to their friends. In a Bain & Company study, customer satisfaction was not a determinate in the growth of the company. The most accurate measure of a company's success was the amount of respondents who said they would refer friends and business associates to that company.

The Nordstrom department store chain is a prime example of garnering customer recommendations. The legend goes that a confused customer had bought tires from a company that used to be located on Nordstrom's property in Oak Brook, Ill. When the customer wanted to return the tires,

## Your Marketing Campaign Inspire Your Customers to Work for You

Nordstrom accepted the return even though it wasn't its merchandise. That confused person may never buy anything at Nordstrom, but the people in the store who witnessed the posterous return surely told their friends who told their friends. And soon, the legend of Nordstrom's exemplary customer service became commonly known and even taught in classrooms.

Nordstrom isn't the only company whose return policy sparks conversation among customers. Tesco, a grocery retailer from the United Kingdom, advertised that customers could return any product that they were unhappy with for any reason. The ad, which demonstrated this policy, showed a woman returning a sole fish because she said it had a "sullen expression" on its face. The worker accepted her return and gave her a happy looking fish. After the commercial aired, several journalists set out to the grocery store to test the return policy. When the Tesco workers

accepted the sullen fish returns, media coverage spread.

Adam Morgan, author of *Eating the Big Fish*, said "Word of mouth has always been a more powerful influence on the consumer than advertising alone. One can measure really successful folklore by the semi personalization of it. Everyone in a focus group will claim to know someone to whom something remarkable has happened in connection with the brand. They themselves feel they are no more than two degrees of separation from extraordinary performance." Consumers want to tell the exciting story of a company that excels in customer service.

Morgan uses the example of a U.K. grocery retailer. At a focus group, one respondent said she had a friend who tried to buy the last package of meat from that store, but the employees would not sell it to her since it was one hour past its expiration date. The cashier

told her selling the meat would compromise the quality standards of the company. Morgan said brands that create "social currency" construct a folklore or mythology around themselves that is "active, social and self-propagating. It is like a virus of favorable equity that gets passed on among existing and potential user groups."

Another way to make customers feel the company is working for them is to provide tips or advice with your product. Online *Spin* columnist Tom Hespos wrote about his outstanding customer service experience with Home Depot. He went in to buy a sander, but on the way into the store noticed a demonstration for cleaning fences and decks with a power washer. After learning how to use the power washer, he left Home Depot with the sander and a power washer. Hespos suggests that companies give helpful advice to their customers, which will build relations with the customer.

A helpful list of tips, which includes your products or services, is more useful to the customer than a hard-sell ad. The customer will be able to pass on your advice and recommend your product to their friends.

Here are a few easy, effective methods for water quality dealers to stand out above the competition:

- Conduct periodic follow up calls to see if there's anything else you can do to improve the purchase experience for your customers.
- Offer "free check ups on a customer's water quality."
- Provide tickets to the local water parks in return for customer loyalty.
- Send birthday cards to customers.
- Sponsor local charity events and give customers the opportunity to participate.
- Contact former customers to explore opportunities to provide service to them again.

When you practice outstanding service, customers refer you to their friends and business associates, and you'll accelerate your revenue growth. **WQP**

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