

Tell the Truth—It does not cost any more!

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I had lunch the other day with a friend who commented on the ethics and integrity of his many suppliers. He stated that he did not like getting lied to constantly about product delivery dates or equipment/supply availability. He said that he can handle the truth, no matter how bad it is, however, he had a real dilemma when suppliers promised one thing and delivered another.

Integrity and trust are two hallmarks in the supplier/customer relationship. Integrity is characteristically defined as the “soundness of moral principle or character..... fidelity with dealing with another person in the making of contracts”. Trust relates to the relationship that one individual has with another, believing in what is said and done. The word of a military officer is his/her bond. That is what we learned in the military— for 35 years, I lived by that creed. Today, I continue to follow that principle each and every day with everyone that encounter.

The reason that integrity and trust are so important in the supplier/customer relationship is that customers rely, depend and plan on what the supplier has said. The customer has developed a bid, established a freight delivery schedule, ordered special installation equipment or promised a finished product based upon what his/her supplier stated was the product delivery date. Without any further communication between the supplier and customer, the customer has no reason to doubt or otherwise not believe that his product from the supplier will not arrive when agreed upon. If the first time the customer learns that his shipment has been delayed, or not sent out is when the truck arrives at the customer’s warehouse, then the customer has lost significant faith and trust in the word of his supplier. Now, most customers will fully understand if a tornado hit the plant, the truck caught on fire travelling to the customer or an unforeseen labor strike delayed the product from being shipped. However, most customers have little to no patience when they expect one thing and receive another. The trust relationship between the supplier and the customer has been seriously breached.

If your firm is a supplier to even one customer, the key to continued positive sales success and enhanced customer satisfaction is to insure that the customer is informed in a timely manner if anything might disrupt the original agreed upon shipping schedule. This can be done as simply as a phone call, an email or even a note sent by snail mail. A better approach is to have the supplier salesman visit the customer and personally inform the customer that his firm appreciates the business that you have provided. However, an unforeseen glitch has occurred and his shipment may be delayed.

Now, this is the time when the real “mettle” of the salesperson is tested. The supplier salesman should be able to identify a substitute product or different vendor that will be able to solve the customer’s demand in a timely manner. Depending upon the relationship that the supplier has with the customer, the supplier may be able to adjust the price, provide “overnight” shipping services, and arrange for more product at the same or lower cost. The possibilities are endless, with little imagination and creative thought on the part of the supplier.

If indeed the supplier knew or should have known that a delivery problem might arise after the order was taken, he/she has an incumbent duty to share that information with the customer at the earliest possible time. This is especially true when the supplier has foreknowledge of the product delay. If the delay is caused by an “Act of God”, atmospheric change or some other unforeseen problem, the supplier will retain and probably gain customers if he/she is sensitive to the needs and demands of the customer and provides solutions that will address and fulfill the customer’s requirements.

I ordered a pair of new sunglasses from the optometrist after a recent eye examination. My prescription had changed significantly enough that a new prescription was necessary. The optometrist told me that the new glasses had to come from California, and would be back in Montana in about 2 weeks. After 3 weeks had transpired, I called to check on the delivery status of my new glasses. Nobody knew anything about any delay, but after talking to several staff members, I was told that someone would check on it and let me know the status of the glasses. Three days later, a technician from the optometrists’ office called and said that my new glasses had arrived and I needed to come in and get fitted.

Excited and joyous that my new glasses had finally arrived, I went in to the Optometrists office to get fitted. I put the glasses on—and could not see anything!! I said, “I cannot see through these glasses!” The staff was “amazed” that the glasses were not correctly finished, however, stated that “sometimes” they need to send them back for modification or re-manufacture. I asked that they do that. I was told that the new delivery date would be another 3 weeks before the glasses would be returned. Three weeks transpired and once again, I called to check on the status. The Optometrists office told me that the glasses “had just arrived”. I returned to the Optometrists office and encountered the same problem, I could not see through the second set of new

glasses. I asked to speak to the senior optician on duty. He was sympathetic with my problem; however, after 6 weeks of waiting for new glasses, his only solution was to send the glasses back for remanufacture again. I told him that I had lost faith in the Optometrists' ability to correctly make the glasses and to give me the prescription and I would go to an optical shop and let them try. Interestingly, he asked which optical shop I was going to visit. I told him, he said that they were the best in town!

When I got to the optical shop, the owner had already received a call from the senior optician at the Optometrists office. After the optician shared what had occurred, the optical shop owner asked if they had used the "FanceeDancee" process. No, the optician said, they did not do that—did not think that process was needed. The optical shop owner said that the "FanceeDancee" process was necessary for my particular prescription.

The optical shop owner was now well aware of my frustration and wanted to make me a happy customer. We reviewed the prescription, found a set of frames that were ideal. The optical shop owner said that the glasses would be back in 7 days, the glasses were made here in town and they would be made right! The glasses arrived in 5 days, fit and were perfect! I was a happy customer! The best thing that happened was when it was time to pay the bill; the optical shop owner seriously discounted the price of the glasses because of the poor service and hassle that I had encountered from the Optometrists office. I strongly refused to take any discount; however, the optical shop owner would not do anything other than provide the discount. Talk about a happy customer—I was then and are still one today!

Customers that have a great relationship and experience with a supplier/vendor will continue to return, regardless of sometime minor snags. Customers that encounter poor service, excuses and delayed shipments will NOT return—they will find a supplier/vendor who has ethics/integrity and is happy and willing to meet the customer needs and demands.

How are you doing with your customers? Do you continue to "under promise and over deliver" or "over promise and under deliver"? There is a big difference between both. If you wish to retain customers and grow your business, always "under promise and over deliver". You will be amazed how word of mouth advertising will spread your level of ethics and integrity! When you loose a customer, a question that you should ask is "was our integrity and trust" questioned? Sometimes the answer can be very revealing; however, if it is the right answer, then you know what you need to do. Retaining a current customer is said to be 10 times easier than acquiring a new customer. You should insure that your practices, processes and procedures are focused on retaining current customers and acquiring new customers.

If you need help, call Solomon Bruce Consulting LLC at 406-672-6387. We can help you enhance your trust and integrity!