

Shep Hyken: Make Customers Loyal

Keeping promises and exceeding expectations will create repeat business and powerful word-of-mouth marketing, says magician turned customer-service expert Shep Hyken.

By Barbara Ballinger | September 2010

In your book, *The Cult of the Customer* (John Wiley & Sons, 2009), you take a look at how companies turn customers into evangelists of sorts. What are the elements of an amazing customer experience?

HYKEN: Your goal should be to provide service that consistently reflects a higher level. You need to build customer confidence, which gets you initial business and repeat sales. Here are the five essentials:

1. Do what you say you'll do. 2. Show up on time and leave late. 3. Create realistic expectations, whether it's the selling price or the transaction timetable. 4. Offer proactive service—call clients before they call you. 5. Be polite and respectful, and never forget to say "thank you."

What kinds of things can damage a customer relationship?

HYKEN: A bad experience or broken promise quickly eliminates confidence. If you don't show up on time or fail to sell a house in the time frame you described, that can end the trust. Most people want to give you the benefit of the doubt. But usually, a lot of good experiences have to happen before the bad ones disappear.

What's the best way to let prospects know they can expect a great experience from you?

HYKEN: It's all about marketing. Take a multifaceted approach—have a great Web site with client testimonials; do videos; use Facebook and Twitter. What was expensive before is now affordable. But you have to deliver on what you say you'll do.

What can a real estate brokerage do to consistently provide magical experiences for customers?

HYKEN: I agree with the saying "Hire for attitude; train for skill." When a buyer or seller sees your company ads and calls, the person answering the phone should be cheerful and helpful. If you're the broker, thank that person for doing a good job, which builds morale and loyalty. If something goes wrong, don't berate anyone, but make it a learning experience.

Do you subscribe to the belief that customers are always right?

HYKEN: No, but I think it's important to let them be wrong with dignity and respect. Get to the root of the problem, which helps restore confidence. Try to disarm them gently by making these points: You hired me because of my experience; I'm doing all I can to sell your house; it's still a tough economy so we may have to lower the price. In the worst cases, you may have to fire a client.

What's your secret for getting repeat clients? I'm a commodity, just like every other product or service. I'm a good speaker and writer, but I try to set myself apart by doing what's extra. I show up on time, leave late, and always give more than is expected.

Getting feedback from customers also is a big part of the picture. I do a preprogram questionnaire so I know what attendees want to learn about. As a salesperson, you need to be prepared for meetings. After you've worked with someone, don't ask how you can do better. Be more specific and ask: Are you happy with what I did?

Can you think of one thing I could do better? It works like magic for relationships. Remember, you're only as good as your last transaction.

You say that superior customer service makes people less concerned about how much they're paying.

HYKEN: Yes, a study found that retailers could charge more if they delivered better service and greater value. If you perform right, people will return, and that's the least expensive way to gain customers.

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For information on Shep Hyken and links to his customer service articles, visit www.hyken.com.



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