

Continuing With The Flow

Last month I wrote about the flow of prospecting. This month, I want to discuss the flow of an established customer relationship. And I want to start with this question: How do customer relationships end?

Loud Or Silent

Relationships with customers can end in a variety of different ways. I have lost customers because of quality or service failures, because the customer went out of business, because a competitor offered lower prices and because my contact left and was replaced by someone who had his own supplier relationships. There were times when the end was rather loud — usually connected to a quality or service failure. But there have also been times when the end was silent, and that is where flow is important.

Here is a fundamental concept: You cannot defend against a problem you do not know that you have. Far too many printers have lost customers and only found out about it when they got around to calling to say something like: “Hey, we haven’t heard from you in a while.”

Interval Strategy

I recommend that you establish a contact interval for every customer. I’m talking about an interval of some number of weeks, and never letting it go by without either you hearing from them or them hearing from you. It might be two weeks or eight weeks or longer, mostly depending on how much they buy from you, and how frequently they typically order. The goal here is to minimize the likelihood that any of the bad things listed above can happen without you at least having the chance to defend yourself.

That raises another question: Do customers ever stay quiet about quality or service failures? I have had relationships end loudly because of such problems, but I have also read that a majority of customers do not complain, they simply go to another supplier. I am not sure I agree that it is a majority, but I think we all can agree that this happens.

The obvious solution to this problem is to follow up on every order, but that is not always a practical solution, especially as online ordering and web-to-print reduce the amount of human interaction on individual orders. My interval strategy can close the gap, though. “Have there been any issues or problems with your orders over the last X weeks?” If you have a problem, you want to know about it, right?

While we are on this subject, let me ask you which call you would rather receive from a salesperson: “Hey, we have not heard from you in a while” or “Have there been any issues or problems over the last X weeks?” One reflects customer service. The other always strikes me as accusatory. “Hey, I have not heard from you. Have you been cheating on me with one of my competitors?”

Added Value

Another thing to consider here is that the customer service call brings value, and the other does not. By extension, you want every contact within the flow to bring value, and you want to avoid any contact that does not. “Just checking to see if you need anything today” may bring value if it is a timely reminder, but if the answer is *no*, it is probably more of an intrusion — which means negative value.

Compare this approach, though: “Hello John, I was thinking about you earlier. You have been ordering (some item) pretty regularly at six-week intervals, but as of today, we’re at eight weeks. So I am calling with a reminder, just in case this is something you have sitting on your desk but have not been able to get to. Just trying to make your life easier!”

Even if the answer here is *no*, I think this call is far more likely to be perceived as value than “do you need anything today?”

Multiple Channels

Please also consider that an interval “call” does not have to be a phone call, and the value does not have to be linked to an actual order. You can maintain the flow with e-mail or postal mail or possibly even social media. Yesterday I received an e-mail from one of my suppliers. It contained a link to an article in the online version of his local newspaper, about my favorite basketball team. The e-mail said: “I thought you might find this interesting.” It did not say: “Let me know if you need anything.” But it did result in a few more back-and-forth e-mails and it added value to our relationship.

Here is a final thought for today: It is never the seller’s responsibility to communicate with the buyer. It is always the other way around. Yes, there is a balance between too much and too little, but a flow of regular and valuable communication is the best way to keep your customer relationships in good health.