

Do Unto Customers...

Good service is essential in today's market

by Joshua Gabriel



It's a universal saying... "The customer is always right." And it sounds great! Be nice to

your customers, make them happy, and they will bring you all of their framing. That's it, right? Well, not exactly... but close. The fact is that most successful businesses have good customer service. And that means doing whatever is necessary to fill your customers' framing needs and desires.

Many frame shop owners believe that great customer service means providing an immaculate custom frame job. While the craft is certainly important, it does not make up the whole picture when it comes to servicing. After all, the finished product is simply assumed. Customers expect that their framed piece will be perfect. Instead, real customer service is about doing anything and everything possible to make the buying process a positive experience.

In every business great customer service starts from the same place—the top. Owners must believe that customers are the single most important element of their success. If an owner treats his or her customers like "gold," and demands employees do the same, a positive, service-oriented culture will quickly evolve in the business.

Customer service seems to define itself. Still, the process of actually providing the service does leave a fairly significant gray area. While it is easy enough to open the doors, have customers walk in, show them samples, frame their pieces, and send them on their way, it is simply not enough. Following are some examples of ways you can ensure that you are serving your customers in the way they expect.

1) Generally speaking, customers expect everything. That means that some of the "special"

things you do will go unnoticed. Fine! Just keep doing them and you will find repeat customers lining up at the door. For example, always clean and re-clean the glazing on a finished piece. (Informal polls showed customers were prone to notice the glazing.)

Never forget to include hangers with the piece. Take the time to put a plastic bag over a new piece. (It's like opening a gift.) Don't forget to secure the protective corners; it's a nightmare when they come off in the car.

Ricky Smith, owner of The Gallery at Brookwood in Austell, GA, knows that superior customer service can set a store apart. "We try to do the little things to help our customers," says Smith. "Offering to carry an order to the car is something a customer really appreciates. It's a simple thing that can make the experience that much more pleasurable."

2) Always be available. When the phone rings, answer it right away. This can be difficult in frame shops where the same individual handles sales and production. The simple solution—a cordless telephone. You will marvel at how customers respond to your accessibility.

If you are involved with another client, just try to get off the phone quickly or offer to call back. And do not stop there. Suggest to customers that



call in for an “over the phone” consultation that they take a digital photo of the area where they want to display their framing so that they can e-mail it to you. Then you can provide some valuable insight as to design, size, and exactly where to hang the proposed piece.

If they want to bring the photo into the shop instead, this can also be a useful tool in the design process. And it’s another way of showing your interest in meeting customer needs. Remember, consumers are buying your expertise, not just your service.

- 3) Always be prompt. It is very important not to promise what you cannot deliver. If you think you may need an extra day to complete and order, tell your customer in advance. You will look like a hero if the piece is finished early.
- 4) Remember to follow up. It’s a good idea to call or e-mail your customers a few days after the sale. It’s a marketing concept that works well at facilitating lasting customer relations.

When You’re The Customer

And what should you expect when you are the customer? The same principles apply here. In order to provide great customer service, you will undoubtedly need help from suppliers. Need to rush a

wedding piece for a top client? Call a supplier. Need to find out a price for a waiting customer? Call a supplier.

Many companies in the art and framing industry have become well-adept at training their respective customer service teams to provide framers with the answers they need to a host of questions. They can give you a shipping quote on the spot, check the status of your order, or help you with a tricky mat cutting technique. Is there a problem with an order? Let them make amends.

Barbara Walker has been the head of Framera’s customer service department for more than seven years. As part of the training course she administers for new members of the department, Walker trains her staff to keep a log of the needs and tastes of individual customers. “We try to know our customers and their individual tastes and requirements,” says Walker. If a customer tells us they are expecting an order that requires a certain moulding, we try to provide them options in advance. It allows us to anticipate and respond to whatever need may arise.”

When it comes to supplier’s customer service, salespeople are often an extension of a company’s customer service department. It is often helpful to contact your salesperson directly. Craig Andersen, sales manager at Bentley Publishing Group, agrees. “Our sales team is willing to do whatever is necessary to help our customers suc-

ceed.” Remember that salespeople are often experienced in handling whatever it is you may need. You can, and should, use them as a resource when needed.

So, as a customer, what can you expect from suppliers? Anything your customers expect from you. Use your suppliers’ knowledge of the industry. Ask them about the hottest trends, the newest designs, the availability of products. Then, pass it on. Your own customers will enjoy the benefit.

The Flip Side

Unfortunately, while superior service has a tendency to stay under radar, the exact opposite is true if customers are left feeling unappreciated. Framer Hillary Lallier of 97 Outlet in New York says, “When I first started working in the [picture framing] industry, I forgot to affix hangers to the back of the piece. The frame was beautiful and the customer really loved it, but you can bet I heard about those hangers.” ■

Joshua Gabriel has spent many years in the picture framing industry, the last several focused on marketing. With a bachelor’s degree in business marketing, he has done extensive writing and research in the field.