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## Customer is King once more, as SMEs power through the tough times

Customer service has always been important to British small businesses, however, it's become even more vital in the downturn as maintaining good customer relations is one of the few elements of their business that they are able to control. Keeping customers loyal and engaged can be the real difference when it comes to staying afloat in tough times.

Here David Critchley Cisco's Head of Commercial & Small businesses and judge of the Cisco Customer Kings awards 2010, offers his top tips on how to provide customer service that makes an impression.

- **Really listen** – knowing your customer isn't just knowing their age-group or income bracket. It's about understanding what really matters to them – what they care about, what they worry about, what excites them. Every time you meet a customer, find out why they use your product and what makes you stand out to them above your competitors so you can try to get a sense of who they are. It's also really important to find out what they'd like to see your business doing more of. Keeping customer feedback in mind is a fool proof way to plan for the future.
- **Embed service in the culture** – your staff are often the main points of contact customers have with your business, so they need to live your brand and company values. Make sure the whole team understands how important every interaction with a customer is – so every time a customer phones or meets you, they'll come away with the impression that your company is passionate about what they do, and really values their loyalty.
- **Encourage interaction - and say thank you** – Customers are often the best source of ideas. Try to encourage feedback at every opportunity – when people are sampling your product, when they visit your website or offices and if you send out a newsletter. Add the person touch and try to respond personally to comments or emails they send you. It's another simple way to show you care about their feedback. And deal promptly with complaints. A happy customer could encourage a dozen others to try your products, however, an unhappy customer could do the opposite if you don't respond promptly, respectfully and honestly.
- **Be human** – the people you come across in business are real people, not just "customers" – each of them has the same messy tangle of memories, dreams and worries that you have. And when others treat us as real people – just a little

gesture, or a bit of banter that shows that they value this short moment with you – it makes life a little richer and happier, and we appreciate it.

- **Watering-cans, not leaky buckets** – It's no good putting all your efforts into finding new customers, if your existing customers are leaking out at the bottom. In fact, your best source of growth is usually the customers you already have. So whilst the occasional new business push is exciting and essential, you should spend most of your resources looking after your existing client-base, monitoring their sales, listening to their feedback and finding opportunities to grow your business with them.

Remember, regardless of your business' size, and whether there's a recession on or not, the importance of customers to its continued success remains the same, so it's worth taking the time to make sure you get your engagement strategy just right.