



Are you providing your customers with the satisfying experience that will keep them coming back?

In a marketplace where too many products and services are chasing too little demand, businesses face a daunting challenge: do everything possible to attract and retain customers.

The stakes are high: Reducing customer attrition by 5 to 10 percent can increase annual profits by as much as 75 percent, according to a study by The Wharton School.

"The next economy will be characterized by customer infidelity. Only those companies focusing on the customer experience will command the loyalty necessary to survive and succeed," says Elliott Ettenberg, a former chairman and CEO of Bozell Retail Worldwide and now president of Ettenberg & Company, Inc., a consulting firm specializing in customer service and turnaround marketing.

Customer service starts by offering both a trouble-free shopping experience and a smooth business transaction. But now more than ever it's also about anticipating and meeting a person's or company's wants, not just needs.

Here are eight strategies for creating a relationship with your customers that will keep them coming back:

1. **Commit to knowing your customer.** In today's interconnected and knowledge-based economy, a business's survival depends on how well the business and IT sides of the company join to meet the needs of customers. Until recently, only large enterprises with hefty budgets could afford the tools needed to manage the entire customer experience.

With the advent of new tools and technologies, such as unified communications and affordable customer relationship management software, many of the cost barriers for smaller businesses are disappearing.

"The company of the future will focus on a combination of people, processes, and technology to achieve success and stay competitive in the new interactive economy. And they'll alter their corporate mindset to deliver the rich customer experience, one customer at a time," says Rob Lloyd, Senior Vice President of US and Canada Operations at Cisco.

2. **Create a customer experience roadmap.** What is the customer experience you want? What new customer-service capabilities will you need to add? What new resources will allow your workforce to be more effective? Can your existing network support the new technologies your business will need in the future, such as call centers, online services and advanced security? Use these questions to create a customer service roadmap that ensures your IT infrastructure evolves in step with your business vision.

With every business and technology decision ask yourself: "Will this investment help my employees better understand the value and needs of my customers and promote superior customer service?"

3. **Remove barriers to information, connectivity and collaboration.** The more you increase your customer knowledge and centralize it into single customer profile, the better positioned you will be to deliver a satisfying customer experience at every customer touch point, be it on the Web, face

to face, e-mail, or telephone.

Do your sales, marketing and support people currently manage separate databases? If so, build a strategy to merge all information into a single customer database accessible by as many people in as many places as possible.

4. **Converge your networks.** Businesses can both reduce costs and enhance customer service by migrating voice and data infrastructures onto a single converged IP network. With a converged, integrated network, there is only one network to manage and one system on which to train technical employees and end users.

It's estimated that by the year 2010, 40 percent of small and medium-sized companies will have integrated their entire voice and data networks into a single network and more than 95 percent of large and midsize companies will have at least started the process, according to Gartner, a market research firm.

5. **Utilize IP Communication Tools.** A large percentage of customer interactions still take place over the phone. Tools like integrated voice and data messaging help employees communicate more efficiently. Single Number Reach enables customers to connect to employees with a single call instead of multiple calls.

Cisco Unified Contact Center Express allows businesses to deploy contact center software that routes customer calls to the agent or employee who can best address the customer issue. In turn, employees have faster access to customer data, improving their ability to provide superior customer service and increase customer loyalty.

And IP Communications-based rich media conferencing enhances collaboration between co-workers, partners, and customers.

6. **Deploy a CRM solution.** Customer interactions happen across multiple channels and departments. How can you easily manage all this activity? Customer relationship management (CRM) software is designed to collect, organize, analyze, and disseminate information about customers, including:
 - o Purchases and returns
 - o Buying habits and other behaviors
 - o The products they own
 - o The newer products they're likely to buy
 - o Service contracts

With CRM software, SMBs can track performance across the entire organization. This includes business activity and employee performance for an inside sales team, call duration and first-call resolution in a contact center, and accurate invoice tracking and billing.

All this information can be quickly communicated to management for more informed decision making.

7. **Integrate IP Communications with CRM.** The convergence of IP telephony with CRM solutions erases many of the obstacles to achieving a truly customer-centric company. The Cisco Unified CRM Connector integrates Cisco Unified Communications with the Microsoft Dynamics CRM application to provide all staff—not just call center agents—with an easy-to-use and more complete CRM solution.

By combining the two, employees can pull up contact information on the screen of any IP telephone on the network. Now employees in any department, such as accounting or shipping and receiving, can view the latest customer information and can better answer customer inquiries and look for cross sell or up sell opportunities. Because all the information can be provided to remote workers, companies can extend their workforce beyond the reach of traditional offices.

8. **Continually modify:** Every company, regardless of size, must track the performance of people, processes and workflows to determine how well they are delivering a satisfying customer experience. Here are some key questions to keep in mind.
- Are we managing all our customer interactions well from first contact to last?
 - Can customer information be accessed by every one who needs it, wherever they are located?
 - Are we continually identifying the needs of individual customers and providing the best response to the right customers at the right time?

Loyalty into profits

"Businesses that fail to build their services and networks around the customer experience will experience high customer turnover, decreasing market share, and increasing cost due to fragmented business processes," says Ettenberg.

That's why smart companies are taking a customer-centric approach to longevity and profitability.

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