



EXPERT ARTICLE

CUSTOMER IS KING! Keep The Customer Satisfied During Tough Times

By Bob Brummell, ENACT Business Architects

They say this means talking to customers more, taking the time to understand a client's needs and doing pro-active little things that "surprise and delight", without waiting to be asked. It is a chance to champion excellent customer service and more businesses than ever before have signed up to celebrate.

"Customer Service" is a core skill that tends to get forgotten and is a vital tool in surviving the recession and should be a top priority. Businesses that fail to retain their customers will not survive and spending extra money chasing new ones is an even more risky business strategy. Understanding how customers interact with them and paying attention to improving the service their customers receive are the best ways for any business to strengthen their foothold in the marketplace.

In February 2009, a major business survey was released aimed at finding the top, most customer focused companies and how they were prospering in these tough economic times.

As a result, over 1,000 businesses (ranging in size from 5 to over 500 employees) were polled and here are the key findings:

- 42% say that the downturn is moving their focus away from acquiring new customers to increasing loyalty with their existing ones
- 57% have introduced new measures in the last 12 months to help build and retain customer relationships, but only 39% say that the business as a whole is getting better at customer service
- 61% believe that their approach to customer service could be improved with more time and resources to focus on quality and insight
- 44% say that putting the customer first is one of three key attributes needed to run a successful business. Second was flexibility to adapt to market changes (39%), and ensuring that employees are professional and motivated ranked third (37%)
- 88% say that a successful business is based on the 'personal touch' when dealing with and selling to customers
- 76% of businesses surveyed said that a personal touch was best created by the attitude of staff

The key recommendations from the survey were:

- Hunt or harvest? - SMEs need to evaluate the challenges associated with nurturing existing customer relationships and 'hunting' for new revenue streams. They should then allocate resources to each appropriately rather than compromising one in favour of the other.

- Learn about customers - better understanding customer buying behaviours and loyalty is achievable, but too few are investing in the tools to deliver this benefit.
- Prioritise staff motivation - it is easy to overlook the importance of morale in a downturn, yet SMEs widely recognise that their staff are essential to good customer service.
- Capitalise on technology - the range of suitable IT options available to SMEs is growing, but too few are embracing them with confidence.
- Time and resources - ensuring that customer engagement is well resourced with dedicated focus is vital to delivering return on investment. Customer engagement cannot be an afterthought, it must form the core of what SMEs do.