

## Keep Talking to Your Customers

A pop-up ad on the Yahoo! website reads:

“Way to grow your business:

- Step 1 - communicate with your existing clients
- Step 2 - repeat step 1”

How’s that for a simple business tip? Sure, you can grow your business by seeking new customers. But increasing sales to existing clients and holding on to them for longer is a much cheaper and far more effective option.

So how do you retain your top-notch clients? You serve them well by forming excellent relationships and communicating with them regularly.



## Listen to Customers

You can’t stay in business today if you just want to sell a product or service. You have to be able to solve a problem for a customer by selling the benefits, or value, that come from the product or service.

To solve their problem you need to find out exactly what the customer needs. Communication is about listening.

You need to build a close relationship which demands tuning in precisely to how the customer thinks and what their needs are.

Often companies will ‘induct’ a new client by welcoming them to their premises to meet the team. The discussion gives you the opportunity to explain how you do things and also to find out as much as you can about the client’s needs, plans and strategies.

Keep checking in and listening to the client on an ongoing basis. Informal phone calls can be an excellent way for a brief chat or follow-up, or for more structured discussions hold face-to-face meetings at regular intervals.

## Tell Customers

Once you know how a customer operates and what their needs are, you need to be able to tell them how you can help. Numerous vehicles can be used to inform.

Again, face-to-face meetings for informing and listening can’t be overstated. However, for specific clients, email or even text messaging can be quick ways to inform and check in with individual customers. Letters can provide more information in a formal way.

These vehicles are good for communicating specific information to specific customers. Because you understand their needs, they will want to quickly hear about a new 24-hour delivery, for example. It’s important though to find out how customers prefer to be contacted and even how often. The last thing you want is to irk customers by emailing them when they loathe receiving it.

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## Keep Talking to Your Customers Cont'd...

Regular newsletters can keep all customers up-to-date on new developments, customer success stories, new products and so on. These could be emailed, mailed or even downloaded from websites.

Client presentations, seminars or breakfast meetings are other 'informing' vehicles. Think about what the customer wants to know, for example, how will industry developments affect or influence their business? Providing excellent service means constantly thinking about how you can help grow their business as well.

### Raise Your Profile

Advertising, articles in relevant magazines and news stories in the media can all help to raise business awareness when aimed at your target audience.

Event sponsorship is another form of exposure for your business and demonstrates the importance you place on your local community.

Professionally-produced brochures and websites also help to promote your business as well as inform potential customers of what you offer. Consistency in branding is vital.

Branding also concerns the look, feel and style of your premises and even includes the way your team greets clients and potential customers on the phone. Don't overlook this.

### Celebrate With Customers

Christmas cards and gifts, customer welcome cards, customer induction procedures and congratulatory cards are all ways to celebrate events. And remember to celebrate your own successes by telling customers if you've just developed a new product or secured an export market, for example.

Remember, every business relies on customers - people do business with people they trust, trust comes through relationship development and relationship development comes through communication.

*Be sure to read each article with the mindset "How this could apply to our business". Thinking of it that way will guarantee that you get value. Also make copies for each team member. To really make sure something positive happens, work with your business development specialists to talk your team through ideas.*



## Next Steps - Communicate and Grow

A powerful way to grow your own business is by helping to grow your customers' businesses. Communicate with them regularly to help solve their problems and they will reward you with repeat business.

Communicate to:

- Listen - find out everything about your customer so you know how your business can help solve their problems: hold face-to-face meetings; talk regularly on the phone.
- Inform - tell your customers what you can do for them to help make their life easier: email, text or write to them to tell them what's new or what's coming up; produce regular newsletters.
- Promote - raise your profile and look professional: brand your business; produce brochures; corporate profiles; websites; set up excellent systems; write articles and news stories.
- Celebrate - have fun with your customers and celebrate events: send Christmas cards and/or gifts; congratulatory notes; welcome cards.

## Becoming Customer Driven

A really practical read on retaining customers in your business is Ian Brooks' *10 Steps to Becoming Customer Driven*. Brooks talks about customer relationship management (CRM) as "not just a marketing initiative or a piece of business software, it is a powerful business strategy. CRM is the way you run your business."<sup>1</sup>

He says businesses serious about becoming customer driven need to build their entire business strategy towards totally caring for the customer, and changing the behaviours by which the team and therefore the business will carry out this strategy.

Everyone in the organisation, from the CEO to the front-office people to the workers in the storeroom, needs to be customer driven.

### Go out of your way to solve the problem

Brooks asks how important is it to retain your customer? Obviously it's very important. Therefore you need to go out of your way to solve the customer's problem.

Why then do surveys reveal such shocking customer service statistics in this country, and why, as consumers ourselves, we often feel fobbed off by companies that show lack of compassion, understanding or care?

You need to care very much if your customer has a problem because if you don't care, they'll go somewhere else that will. Walk in the customer's shoes for a change - if they have a problem, it becomes your problem to fix. Help solve the problem, and the customer and you will walk away happy. Strive always for a win-win situation.

A customer-driven organisation involves putting the right systems in place and the right people in place and managing your relationships with customers really well.

<sup>1</sup> *10 Steps to Becoming Customer Driven*, by Ian Brooks, Nahanni Publishing Limited, 2001.

*"CRM (Customer Relationship Management) involves everyone in the organisation whether they have direct customer contact or work in the back office."*

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## Take Stock with Annual Legal Check-Up

Ignorance is no excuse when it comes to breaching the law. But keeping up with law changes and how they affect your business can be onerous.

To keep abreast of recent legislation and to make sure you stay on track, it's a good idea to plan an annual legal check-up with your solicitor.

### Review Your Business Operations

Regular check-ups give you the opportunity to review all aspects of your business operations. Numerous laws influence your business and the implications of recent court cases and changes in the law may require you to make adjustments in some areas.

Don't get caught out through your own lack of awareness. Legislation is always evolving - employment law, for example, has seen big changes in New Zealand recently - and the world of commerce is dynamic, especially as telecommunications technology and the global village we now live in effect faster and better ways of doing things.

Internet businesses, for instance, and those offering trading on-line must keep track of laws relating to e-commerce. Copyright laws also become extremely important here.

All business owners need to be fully conversant with commerce laws, including restrictive trade practices, fair trading and consumer protection.

### Staff and the Workplace

If you employ staff, changes to employment law will directly affect you, including amendments to the Holidays Act 2003 and the introduction of the KiwiSaver scheme under the KiwiSaver Act 2006. Health and Safety legislation, which was amended in 2002, is hugely important for all employers.

Businesses involved in parallel importing need to be up-to-date on copyright laws, specifically the amendments to the Copyright Act in 1998 and 2003 relating to the parallel importing of copyright goods.

Environmental and resource management law will be extremely important to other businesses.

These are just some of the laws which could affect your business. Most companies will be influenced by many more. Stay on track with legal issues by keeping in regular touch with your solicitor.

## Consider the Value You Add When Setting Professional Fees

Where to set charge-out fees is often a tricky problem for many professionals.

Set them too high and you might scare potential clients off, yet people can also be dissuaded by very low rates, thinking they will not get good service.

It's important to charge what is reasonable for the work involved but at the same time to have confidence in the value you are giving to the client.

It is much more ethical to charge a higher rate and work efficiently to produce the work rather than waste time on unproductive activities to try and 'run up' a client's bill. Honesty and trustworthiness will earn you a good reputation.



## Quality of Service Counts

While professional fees are certainly a factor in any buying decision, clients are likely to be more concerned with the level of service they receive from you. Your business's professional output may in fact be similar to that of another company, but your relationship to the client and the quality of service you give may put you in a class of your own.

For example, are you reliable? - do you return calls promptly, call when you say you will, charge what you quote and deliver on time?

Are you customer driven? - are you passionate about your clients' businesses, do you enthusiastically help to solve their problems, and strive always to move their own business forward by keeping one step ahead of their needs (proactive rather than reactive)?

Are you innovative and forward thinking? - do you seek an excellent reputation in your field, do you offer innovative services, do you prioritise ongoing professional development for both yourself and your staff?

How much you differentiate your business through your enthusiasm and excellent customer servicing will determine how much premium you can build into your professional fee rate.

It's a good idea to talk to your accountant about where to set your professional fees. He or she can help you consider all the factors involved in running your business.



## An important Message

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**Integrity+Expertise=Success**

P.O Box 1444, Paraparaumu Beach 5252

Level One, 17-19 Seaview Road, 5032

Paraparaumu Beach

Ph:04 2986025 Fax: 04 2986205

[www.temperton.co.nz](http://www.temperton.co.nz)

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