

Inc.

Do You Like Your Customers?

If you don't, your business is never going to be more than a chore. And the first people to notice will be the ones who pay your bills.

By Brian Hamilton, December 15, 2011



You should be able to describe your customers like you know them personally.

I want to ask you a question. Do you like your customers?

Sometimes I meet business owners who obviously can't stand the sight of the next person to walk through those doors or into the boardroom. And instantly, I know they're dooming their business. Their dislike acts like a contagion. It spreads to their employees, giving them permission to dismiss the customer's importance. Soon enough, sales are falling, and margins are even slimmer.

My company does financial analysis of private companies, and our customers are CPAs. CPAs tend to be very reserved, even introverted. They don't glad-hand. They're engineers, not sales people. They're generally a little bit older. And they're very focused on the task at hand.

But they do important work, and they're very dedicated to taking care of their clients. They have high standards and high integrity. And as I tell my people, they are the ones who pay our bills and help the company make payroll and put shoes on our kids' feet. What's not to like about that?

And when you like your customers, you get good at serving their needs, even anticipating them. Helping them becomes a calling, not a chore. Here's what else I do to make sure my customers feel that my company really cares about them.

Hire People Who Really Do Care

I try to hire people just like me: folks who are passionately willing to serve other people. I start with the questions in an interview. I don't bother asking, Where did you go to school? That's on the resume. I ask, What have you done for other people?

I ask everyone that question. What I'm looking for are candidates who are involved somehow in their community. Or their church. Maybe they're a big brother or sister. Anything that shows they care about other people. They're going to take to our company's culture a lot more easily than someone who doesn't get what I'm driving at.

Learn More About the Customers

You need to have conversations with your customers. I've found that surveys work well. We ask the customer to evaluate our employees. I make sure to pose the questions carefully. It's not, Should this employee be fired? Instead, I employ a rating scale. On a scale of one to five, how would you rate the quality of information you received today?

Focus groups are useful, too. I invite four to five customers at a time, in person or on a teleconference. I make sure the product people are there as well. It can't be left to a research-and-development team.

Control the Customer Relationship

If you can't describe your typical customer like you know them personally, then I suggest you immediately involve yourself in every process and every touch point connecting your business to the customer: Hires. Surveys. Sales. You need to control your business' customer interactions. All of them.

Too often, a company grows too big, and that responsibility falls to employees. But the company won't run well if you're too removed from the customers.

Come to think of it, I'm starting to get a little worried. I just realized that I haven't done enough focus groups lately.

For the full story by Sageworks' CEO, Brian Hamilton, please visit [Inc. – Do You Like Your Customers?](#)