

There is no “I” in Customer

Look at your business from a different perspective

By Erica Bracey

The old sports mantra says, “There is no ‘I’ in Team.” Well, the same thing can be applied to business... “There is no ‘I’ in Customer.” As a SBDC consultant, I talk with many successful, as well as aspiring business owners. Although there is no guaranteed rulebook for success, the prosperous business owners seem to have one thing in common – they realize that their customers are the boss.

It is natural for an entrepreneur to feel very passionate about their business. They often refer to the business as their “baby” and use terms like, “I think,” or “I like.” They receive a quick reality check when the owner is reminded that regardless of the weeks, months, or even years that have been dedicated to the business that – it’s not about you...it’s all about the customer. Yes, the business is built on your sweat, tears, and sometimes blood. Unfortunately, customers don’t necessarily care what *you* like; they want what *they* like. The most important opinion is the opinion of the people who walk through the door or fill the online shopping carts and make the cash register ring. It is important that you look at your business through the eyes of your customer and continuously stay focused on what it takes to keep people happy enough to give you their hard earned money – especially during a tightening economy!

Spending 80 hours a week in your office buried in paperwork does not make you an authority on your business if you are

only viewing the business from the owner’s perspective. If you truly want to see the business through your customers’ eyes, then you must get feedback from the perspective of the customer. Here are five easy, yet often overlooked suggestions for gaining a customer’s perspective.

- 1. Look at the whole process.** Start at the parking lot or web site homepage and break down every step of the customer experience and look for opportunities or issues. What kind of impression does my business give from the front door? Does my store feel inviting? Are my aisles, racks and shelves cluttered? Does the flash on my web site slow down page loads? What can we do to enhance the purchasing process and exceed customers’ expectations?
- 2. Involve employees.** If you stay locked in the office under paperwork all day every day, then your employees are the closest link you have to the customer. Tap into their insight and daily dealings with customers. Ask for suggestions and recommendations. You are guaranteed to get some great information and, more importantly, employees will be more motivated to enact change if they are included in the process.
- 3. Talk to customers on a regular basis.** These ladies and gentlemen
- 4. Get feedback from former customers.** The only way to find out why people left you is to ask. Whether you want to hear it or not, former customers can provide you with a wealth of information on how to improve your business. I suggest using a third party when soliciting former customers for feedback. It increases the chances of getting honest feedback and takes some of the pressure off of the customer.
- 5. Secret Shop.** What’s going on when no one is watching? Solicit friends and family to secretly shop your business. Is everyone walking the walk and talking the talk? Friends and family want you to succeed and are often motivated to help you identify opportunities for improvement.

At the SBDC, we understand that running a small business is not easy. Business owners frequently get so focused working IN the business that they forget to work ON the business. It’s almost inevitable if the president or

managing member finds himself or herself wearing four, five, or six different hats within the business. Regardless of how many things still need to be crossed off the to do list, how much mail is unopened, or how many vendor phone calls still need to be returned, never forget that the customer comes first. Without them, nothing else matters!



Erica Bracey is a business consultant with the Georgia State University SBDC. To find your local SBDC, call the state office at 706-542-2762 or locate it on the web at www.georgiasbdc.org.