One Chance to Make a First Impression

By Heather Woods

We have all heard the phrase, “you have only one chance to make a first impression,” usually in relation to interviewing for a job or meeting new people. You may not have considered that this adage applies to your small business also. During their first contact with your company, your potential customers are interviewing you, forming impressions, and making decisions about whether they want to do business with you.

What impression are you giving? If you have a retail business, customers are initially judging you on visual appeal. How does your storefront measure up? Is the entrance clean and appealing? Is your signage easy to see and attractive? Are your window displays fresh and eye-catching? Once customers enter your store, what do they see? Are your products attractively displayed and easy to access? Can customers move easily around your business, or is your store so crowded that shoppers risk toppling your merchandise? It may help to have another set of eyes evaluate or ‘mystery shop’ your business to get objective opinions about the visual and functional appeal of your store.

Retail owners should pay attention to trends in visual merchandising, taking cues from larger retail establishments and trade publications. If creating striking merchandise displays isn’t your strong suit, look to hire employees with this type of experience or collaborate with someone who has a creative background to help you improve your visual image.

If you have a service-based business, customers form impressions from their initial contact with your company as well. What do your flyers, brochures, business cards and other marketing pieces look like? Are they professionally produced and well-designed? Many business owners, in an effort to economize, create their own marketing pieces using desktop software. Very often, these “do-it-yourself” efforts look amateur and the printing quality may be inferior. Check to see what your competition is doing – if their materials are professionally done, yours need to be of equal or better quality.

What image are you presenting in your advertisements? Look at advertisements for larger businesses in national publications and the media, and note what gets your attention and why. Big businesses have budgets to research what customers respond to and design their advertisements based on this research. Your small business can benefit from this research by utilizing similar concepts in your own advertising pieces.

Impressions of your business are created based on non-visual issues also. The first contact that many customers have with a business is often through the telephone. How is this contact handled? Does a live person greet the callers cheerfully, or are they subjected to endless electronic transferring before they reach someone who can help? Long hold times on the telephone and long waits for return calls don’t create a positive customer experience. Have you invested in basic customer-service skills training for your employees? Time and again, customers form negative impressions based on rude treatment from the staff. Are your employees empowered to create customer satisfaction, or do they have to refer all decisions to the manager? Long wait times, poor phone manners, and uncooperative sales associates all damage your business image.

How do you present your business at networking events and other points of contact, both business and social? Every business owner needs to have an “elevator speech” prepared, which is a brief summary of what your business offers. You should be able to describe your business basics in 30 seconds or less, about the time you would have during an elevator ride with a potential customer. Remember, when you own your own business, every contact you make could be an opportunity to market your business products and services, whether you are at a chamber of commerce function or at the grocery store. Be prepared to make a positive impression with each contact.

Take a look at the image that your small business is projecting, and be sure that you are making the very best first impression that you can.

Heather Woods is a business consultant in the Augusta office of the Georgia SBDC Network. To find the office located near you, go to www.georgiasbdc.org or phone 706-542-2762.