Seven Ways to Keep Your Promises and Build Customer Trust

I was driving on the highway the other day and noticed the billboard advertisement had changed. Facing me, and all the other motorists who drive that stretch of the road, was a mouth-watering display of fine dining: an elegant dinner spread out on a table covered in a white tablecloth. The words "Room Service" were written along the bottom.

As all advertisements do, this was setting expectations. In essence, it was making a "promise." I laughed at the irony of it.

No, the billboard wasn't advertising the offerings of an Inn or a bed and breakfast. It was advertising the food served at a local hospital – the very same hospital fare that my neighbor had been complaining about the week before.

I had called to ask about her husband. Although her husband was recovering, it was going to be a long process, slowed evidently, by his reluctance to eat the hospital food. She started bringing him food from home so that he could gain some of his strength back.

According to my neighbor, the hospital food often came late and was cold. Other patients and families complained about the food and the service too, she told me. Then, she said something interesting. Something all businesses and all managers should think about.

A Matter of Trust

"If they can't deliver the food on time and while it's hot, then why should I trust the quality of his care?" Why indeed. Forget the billboard that suggests patients get an in-room dining experience comparable to a 4-star restaurant. My neighbor was talking about basic expectations. When a hospital offers its patients baked chicken and mashed potatoes, there is an unspoken promise that the food will be hot. When the nurse says dinner will arrive between 4 and 4:15, there is an agreement that it will be served within that timeframe.

My neighbor ended our conversation with a piece of advice. "If you or your family have a need to go to a hospital – and I hope you don't – go somewhere else." A broken promise equates to a breakdown in trust and without trust, customers have no reason to return.

Keep Your Promises

Think about that for a moment. If you break your promises – if you break that trust – customers will go somewhere else. As a frontline service employee, there are seven ways to keep your promises and build trust.

1. **Be consistent.** Customers trust you when they walk in and they want you to validate that trust by giving them what they expect, every time. It becomes a promise and they trust you to deliver on that promise again and again.

2. **Stop your non-consumer tasks to check out customers and eliminate their wait.** Letting customers wait in line while you finish other tasks is a broken promise for sure. As far as your customers are concerned, you are there for them. And, they're right.

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3. **Answer your phone.** Phone customers are important too. At some point they will stop in to buy. Or perhaps the phone call is about them coming in to buy. If you are waiting on a customer, say "Excuse me for a moment," and answer the phone. If it is a quick question, answer it, hang up, and thank the customer in front of you. If it is a call that requires time, explain to the phone customer that you are helping other customers; ask the customer to hold or take a message and return the call. The important thing is to acknowledge phone customers and treat them with respect -- or you'll lose them.

   I'll give you an example. This morning, I tried three times to call a service company to do some work on our home. The company had done satisfactory work for us last year so they were my first choice. I checked the number and tried again. After the fourth time of endless ringing, I pulled out the yellow pages. I'm getting an estimate from another company.

4. **Be available.** I am always amazed by the number of small businesses who post their hours as 10-5 and then put a sign in the window that says something like "back at 12:30." Maybe it's the only day that week that you went out to lunch or to the bank. But, it was the day I chose to visit.

   Consider how much better it is from a customer's perspective to see posted hours as 10-noon and 12:30–5. Then, if you happen to be there between noon and 12:30 on any given day, it's a bonus for any customer who shows up.

5. **Understand your company's Mission Statement.** Many businesses post their Mission Statements and Company Values for the public to see. If your company does so, you better live up to them. Waiting in line too long and not being acknowledged is poor service. Doing so in front of a sign that promises prompt, friendly service for every customer, every time, is unforgivable.

6. **Under-promise and over-deliver.** Even when you tell a customer it's an estimate, you've set an expectation. If you estimate delivery by the 15th, tell the customer that it will arrive between the 15th and 17th. Then, if it arrives on the 14th, you'll have a delighted customer and any time within the timeframe, a satisfied customer. That sure beats facing a disappointed customer if you set the expectation for the 15th and the product arrives on the 16th!

7. **Keep your public restrooms clean.** It may not be fun, but it is part of your job. All businesses that offer public restrooms should provide clean and sanitary conditions. Think about it. A clean restroom reflects positively (or negatively) on the business itself.

   Over the years, however, I've been conditioned to expect less from certain businesses, like gas stations. A dirty restroom in a restaurant or a grocery store though? I'll never go back.

Think about the promises your company makes to its customers. What can you do as a frontline employee to keep those promises and build customer loyalty?

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