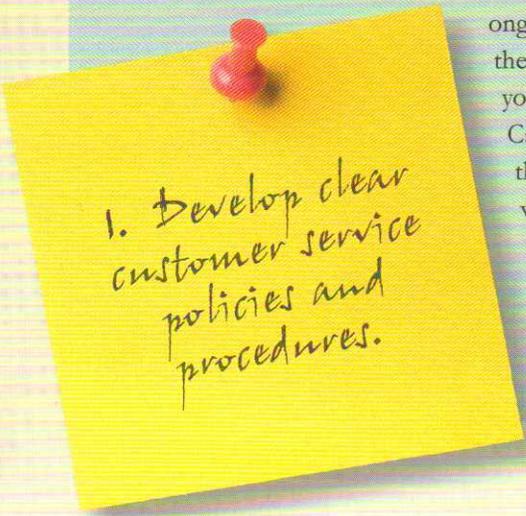


Customer Relationship Management: An Overview of Five Best Practices

By Marlene Dube

No matter the size of your business, implementing the basic principles of customer relationship management (CRM) can help attract, retain, and delight your customers. CRM methodologies, tools, systems, and software aim to maximize customer satisfaction and loyalty. Highly satisfied customers do more than make your care management practice rewarding. They are likely to be receptive to new products and services you introduce, recommend you to other potential customers, give you free advertising in the form of positive feedback about your company, and are less apt to be sensitive to price and defect to a competitor.

Implementing CRM concepts in your business takes time and effort, and much like attention to quality, it is an ongoing and evolving process. Think about the companies whose customer service you find exemplary. L.L. Bean? The Ritz Carlton? Disney? Amazon.com? While these organizations have nothing to do with care management, they strive to exceed their customers' expectations and provide lessons for any business, large or small. An overview of five best practices is as follows:

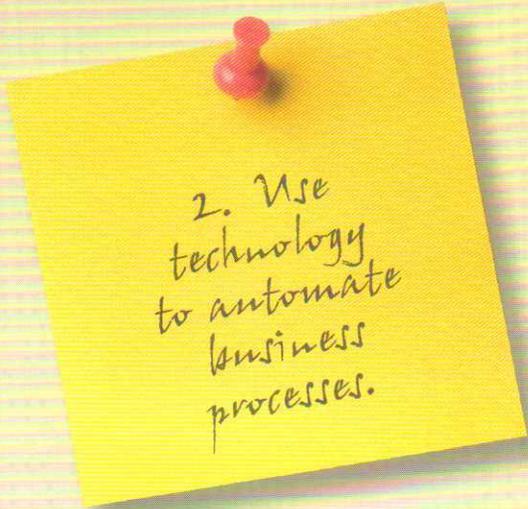


1. Develop clear customer service policies and procedures.

Every employee in your company should be familiar with your philosophy on customer service and empowered to assist customers as much as possible. Give employees the leeway and flexibility to resolve customer complaints, within parameters with which you are comfortable. Think of times that you have been able to resolve your own complaints with a company quickly and easily, without being put on perpetual hold "for a supervisor."

Your customer service policies can also include standards for phone, voice mail, and electronic communications, and other business etiquette issues. Pay attention to the details. How are your phones answered; is it convenient

for people to reach you? Are callers required to listen to an endless menu of choices by an auto attendant? If you don't have a live person answering the phone, is it easy for someone to leave a message with the appropriate person? Are voice mail greeting messages up to date? Are calls from customers and colleagues returned promptly? Unfortunately it is all too common to be "too busy" to return phone calls or e-mail messages from peers or colleagues, but these people are also potential referral sources. Cultivate a reputation as being reliable, dependable, and willing to help, and encourage these characteristics in your employees as well.



2. Use technology to automate business processes.

2. The more customers you have, the more difficult it is to track things manually or piece together contact lists. CRM software, designed to track and handle contacts as well as assess the effectiveness of your marketing efforts, has become much more affordable for small businesses as well as much more user-friendly. Automated reminders to follow up with clients or potential customers will help you become more focused. Blogs and regular e-mail communications to customers can also be set up with a minimum investment.

Remember, automation does not mean giving up "the personal touch." Regular follow up helps generate repeat business and word of mouth referrals. This can be something as simple as sending a personal, handwritten note to a customer or making a quick phone call to pass along information. Don't ignore the existing customers you worked so hard to obtain—especially the "quiet ones" who don't demand much of your time.

3. Include the Voice of the Customer in your business decisions.

3. What services does your target market really want or need? Why did they choose you instead of a competitor who offers similar services? Make it easy for customers to reach the appropriate people in your company to express their needs, perceptions, and complaints, and use appropriate tools to measure customer satisfaction. Consider developing frequency programs, which provide rewards to your best customers, or discounts and package pricing deals to attract new customers. Solicit ideas from employees frequently. They are the ones "in the trenches" who deal with clients and their families on a daily basis.

4. Provide customer service training for your employees and educate yourself.

4. Once you have the right software, as well as policies and procedures in place, investing the time and money to train employees is critical. It won't do any good to have CRM software installed if it isn't used. It is not uncommon for employees to resist change and the "growing pains" of doing things differently. Your own efficiency and employee productivity may drop during the learning curve. Be patient. Regular practice will eventually pay off.

Remember that training is not a one-time thing. Technology changes; skills need updating. Investing in your company's growth includes investment in ongoing training.

5. Recognize outstanding employees.

5. Acknowledge the 'stars' who consistently practice good customer service, whether they are the employees answering the phones or care managers working with clients and their families. Recognition does not necessarily mean a cash bonus. Verbal recognition or small "perks" send employees the message that you appreciate their hard work and the value they bring to your company.

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In spite of all we know about the principles of good customer service and in spite of our good intentions, there will always be occasions when mistakes are made and customers are dissatisfied. Handling these situations requires tactfulness, finesse, taking responsibility for problems, and working to resolve them quickly. You may feel the customer is dead wrong, but listen and empathize anyway. Chances are you will learn something that will enable you to improve some aspect of your business. Since most dissatisfied customers will never complain but will "vote with their feet,"—or badmouth your company to people they know—any complaint you do receive is an opportunity to review your processes.

Basically there are two ways that companies retain customers: either the customer feels that making a switch is too costly, or the customer is highly satisfied

and feels no need to take his/her business elsewhere. In the care management field, "high switching barriers" that prevent customers from leaving

are not likely. Excellent customer service is the key.

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