

Business suggestions range from customer satisfaction, to promotion, to performance

■ The National Association for the Self-Employed (NASE) is an organization serving the needs of small businesses in America, providing services and benefits to help its members be more competitive. Its membership is more than 275,000.

Here are some business hints from the NASE on various small business-related subjects:

Promoting your business

Just as you would not go on a sales call with your shoes unpolished, be sure your business image isn't unpolished either. To improve your business, several marketing tools are available:

- Printed materials should be well-designed and consistent. Don't be afraid to borrow ideas from other companies. Keep printed products simple. Use the same paper stock for all printed products, so their very look becomes recognizable as yours.
- Logotypes identify companies and can be as simple as using a stylized typeface for your company name on all printed materials mailed to prospective clients.
- Box advertising in the local Yellow Pages should be different from your competitors and well-designed.
- Advertising creates an image and stimulates sales. The "tone" and context of the ad should reflect the personality and culture of your company.

Improving performance

Employee reviews reinforce good work habits and act as guidelines for job improvement. Not only is a job review a "yardstick" of work accomplished, but can protect an employer against unlawful dismissal litigation. Here are some ways to ensure successful employee performance reviews:

- Tell employees they are going a great job, is such is the case. If employees feel unappreciated, they'll leave. And it's too late to retain a good employee after they have accepted another position.
- Base reviews on specific job functions. When you hire someone, job responsibilities should be outlined in writing.

- Review employees at least once a year.
- Make employee goals measurable.
- Don't downgrade people because they fall down in one aspect of their jobs.
- Don't ignore poor performance. Let employees know where they need to improve.
- Evaluate for the entire time since the last review, not just recent efforts.
- Use reviews for two-way communication. Not only is the review a rating tool, but should be a planning device to map out a growth plan for an employee.

Satisfying customers

If you want to maintain customer loyalty, you have to handle complaints properly. Bennie Thayer, NASE chairman of the board, says you must handle complaints quickly and effectively. Otherwise, you run the risk of losing a customer and word-of-mouth recommendations to potential customers. Here are other tips:

- Handle the problem yourself, now. Don't try to pass it off to someone else.
- Make sure you understand the problem completely and restate it positively. Don't imply the customer is exaggerating or wrong.
- Take full responsibility for the problem. And remember: The customer's always right.
- Don't ever say "It's not our policy," or "Sorry, there's just nothing I can do."
- If the problem can't be resolved, give something of equal or greater value as a substitute. Often, this will show that you really value the customer's business.
- Be friendly, no matter how provoked you are. Even the hottest-tempered customer will cool off and may wind up your greatest ally.

—For information on joining the National Association for the Self-Employed, write NASE Member Services, P.O. Box 612067, DFW Airport, TX 75261-2067 or phone toll-free (800) 232-6273.

Small business survival in a slow period

■ Small businesses may be the hardest hit during an economic slowdown because of tight credit and the inability to buy in quantity.

The NASE has this advice:

- Don't skimp on service and quality by being understaffed. Your options include part-timers and consultants. Check the "Opportunities Wanted" ads in local newspapers or turn to local schools and universities.
- Cut personal spending. Simple solutions can make a difference.
- Meet with your staff weekly to exchange ideas on increasing productivity and reducing costs. Create an incentive for

Don't be afraid to pull out all stops and work more hours during selling season, NASE says.

top suggestions and a team spirit for survival.

- Be prepared to "pull out the stops" during peak times for your service. Don't be afraid to work more hours during a selling season or around holidays.
- Remain close to existing clientele.

Telephone your contacts and find out about developments in their business that could lead to new opportunities or help you avoid unpleasant surprises.

● Carve out more time for pursuing new business. With spending slowing down, new business referrals are harder to get. It's time to go after new business aggressively by networking with industry and community groups. If this is not your strong point, seek information from those that do it well.

● Analyze cash flow. Know where you'll stand in three months. Is there room for improvement by boosting collection of accounts receivable or reducing inventory?