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research. "You cannot infer cause and effect at all....Further research needs to be done to elucidate that," he was quoted as saying.

Although it's small comfort to LCOs, the timing of the article—coming at the height of selling season—could have been worse yet. "USA Today," the most widely read newspaper in the country, boasts a circulation of 1.9 million on Mondays. It jumps to 2.4 million on Fridays.

—Ron Hall

Hurray for complaints!

by Robert Andrews

■ It is hard to argue with the statement that "the primary purpose of business is to create a satisfied customer." If we can accomplish that, most all else will follow.

Hard evidence suggests that companies known for exceptional service can regularly charge higher prices than their competitors. And while outstanding customer service must start at the top, it must also be pervasive throughout the business. It must be consistent, monitored for defects, fine tuned, and constantly updated. It must involve everyone from the owner to

Why people buy

■ Remember that customers tend to consistently buy based on the following reasons:

- ✓ Constant presence of the product or service.
- ✓ Ease of use or installation.
- ✓ Ease of payment for the good or service.
- ✓ Packaging.
- ✓ Timeliness of delivery.
- ✓ Willingness of the vendor to respond to complaints.
- ✓ Information provided on the good or service.

Looking at our own businesses, what can we do to improve the quality of any of the above?

—B.A.

the technician, and to the customer, too.

A recent survey concluded the following reasons why businesses lose customers:

- 9% lured away by lower prices.
- 5% influenced by others to trade elsewhere.
- 3% moved away or left the market place.
- 1% died.
- 68% quit because of perceived discourtesy, poor service, or indifference on

the supplier's part.

• 14% quit because complaints weren't addressed satisfactorily.

While we cannot do much about those who die or move away, we can do a great deal about the 82 percent who stop shopping for reasons directly influenced by ourselves or our employees.

The average business in the United States does not ever hear from 96 percent of its unhappy customers. Most marketing studies claim that for every actual complaint a business receives, another 24 to 26 are not being spoken out loud. Of these silent complaints, six are serious and threaten the firm's relationship with the customer.

Of even greater influence is what certain unhappy customers can do to our company by telling their neighbors or business associates. In other words, the business that we lose may be small compared to the business we will never get.

How can we structure our business so that these non-complainers become complainers?

- 1) Get them to complain.
- 2) Solve those complaints quickly.
- 3) Keep records as to why customers complain.
- 4) Make operational changes based on these records.

—The author is owner of Andrews and Associates, Carmel, Ind. Andrews and wife Jennifer operate two lawn care companies in Indiana.

Marketing: the only way to win

You need more than a 'me too' approach. Learn what makes your customers tick, and offer a 'valuable difference.'

■ If you're not practicing accurate marketing techniques, you'd better start, says Lewis Browning, because there's very little a good marketing plan can't do:

- It defines who your customer is and what services they'll buy from you.
- it determines your location; it is what

attracts customers to your business.

• most importantly, marketing sells products, and Browning is dead serious when he says marketing absolutely determines the success of your business.

It starts with how well you know your customers or prospects. What's their lifestyle, their habits, their income? When are they at home?

"In other words," says Browning, "which customer base is profitable for you? Target a particular market segment and specify the services you'll provide; then, determine what kind of people those services might attract.

"The customer becomes the focus of everything you do."

Browning is the founder of Wall-

Bruning Associates, a management consulting firm in South Carolina.

When it comes to a customer's "economic needs," you've got to find a way to sell a product they want and are willing to pay for, otherwise, predicts Browning, you'll waste time and money pursuing the wrong customers with the wrong service.

Be different!—And don't become a "me too" marketer. "If you're (offering the same services)," warns Browning, "don't copy! If you're doing exactly the same thing as your competitor, you're forced into price competition, and the only thing you can say is 'I can do it cheaper.'"

You've got to find a *valuable difference*.

You can be different in a variety of
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ways:

- in the services you provide;
- in the way you perform those services;
- in the way you bill or collect payment.

The future is now—If your marketing plan is in order for now, don't rest on your laurels. "Are you preparing for the things that will change your business in five years?" asks Browning.

Time flies when you're having fun. Don't become lazy.

Why would you ever want to know your customer better? Here's a few of Browning's reasons:

- so you can serve them better;
- so you can find more customers like them;
- you can learn how they view you;
- if you do a good job for them, they will help you grow.

Focus groups work—To serve customers better, try surveys, focus groups and obtain referrals if at all possible.

The customers you invite for a focus group will have more time to tell you exactly what they think of your company,

Don't chase the wrong customers with the wrong service.

your staff, or your methods.

But be prepared. They might say some things you didn't expect.

All of this serves two purposes: It grows the business, and eliminates the call from the "lost customer," which, says Browning, is probably the most painful conversation you can have with a customer, but which, in hindsight, can be your best source of feedback.

Browning spoke to green industry professionals during the November, 1994 Green Industry Expo in St. Louis.

—Terry McIver



Browning: What are customers willing to pay for?

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