



It's a great time to build client loyalty

Everybody wants a deal these days. Let me rephrase that. Everybody *expects* a deal these days. A discount. An introductory coupon. An extra perk. A free service. That's the new price of attracting customers and buying loyalty in this new normal economy.

Can you remember another holiday season like this past one in which every retailer discounted or offered special deals ("doorbusters") every day leading up to Christmas?

Consumer uncertainty and bargain hunting define our new normal, and it might last two, three, perhaps four years. Who knows?

Recognizing that, most of us might be content to hold serve in terms of revenue this season despite a recovery that's starting to creep in on a fraction of a percentage point at a time. (Is anybody else as sick as I am about the term "green shoots" as it applies to the recovery?)

Hold the champagne

Amid this new postrecessionary normal, government economists (I understand thousands are on public payrolls.) predict the U.S. economy will grow 2% to 3% next season. Growth, any growth, is welcome, but this hint of recovery is suspect. It's hardly enough to spur the level of demand for our services that we experienced prerecession.

It's evident to all of us acquiring new customers is more difficult than ever. The prices we charge for

our services are stagnant (at best) and will remain so. What's new, right?

Competitive pressures have kept most of us from raising prices for years. Despite that, many of us maintained acceptable margins by delivering new services and products to our customers, increasing productivity and aggressively controlling costs these past two years.

All of that kept us going in the right direction in terms of margins, but it probably won't be enough in this new normal in which just about everybody has become a bargain hunter. Who can blame them? The recession hammered homeowners, property managers, and commercial and institutional managers. They're financially bruised, and they're wary.

We're in this together

We must be more aggressive about learning clients' needs and desires. This means getting to know as much about our customers (and their businesses, assuming they're commercial clients) as we can. Then we're going to have to be much more creative in meeting and exceeding their stated and observed needs and wants.

Beyond that, most of us would do well to improve our customer communication and hand-holding. We need much more of both.

Let's adopt a "we're in this together" attitude, especially in terms of clients' landscape budgets. What we do now can earn clients' loyalty for additional services and products when they're more confident of their financial prospects. Let's not get carried away, though.

Rather than slash prices, which could diminish our service quality, the better option might be to reduce services temporarily, continue to provide great service, and offer customer-loyalty bonuses.

Obviously, neither great service nor perks accomplishes much unless we inform clients (tactfully) of how their loyalty to us is beneficial to themselves. In other words, give a little extra now; earn back much more when our new normal is better.

Rather than slash prices, which could diminish our **service quality**, the better option might be to **reduce services** temporarily and offer customer **loyalty bonuses**.