



BEST PRACTICES

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The long view on customer loyalty

It's easy to say that we go the extra mile for our customers. But do we? Driving business forward often means more than just bending over backward. It can often require making compromises that don't make sense financially but pay off in the long run.

Throughout my career I've based my customer relationship philosophy on the value of my worth, not the worth of my value. What this means is that I don't let the relationship get lost in the fine print. When that happens, the relationship stops being worthwhile.

To achieve this, I've had to take the long view—which often means making a little less over a longer time. It's required that I bend with the winds of change and adapt to shifting preferences. This approach has served me well. Making strategic adjustments over the course of my relationships has rewarded me with “customers for life” and relationships built on a foundation of appreciation and trust.

If you're in service to a company, you're a partner who must also share in the ebb and flow of your customer's business cycles. You need to maneuver around potential deal breakers to win on consistency, even when budgets are tight or when the weather affects production.

Doing more for less can seem counterintuitive to ambitious companies wanting to grow their business faster and increase profit. The prevailing theory is to leverage and use market variables as opportunities to make money. Unfortunately, this can backfire and put companies on a win-lose path.

Consider this winter. Many companies are benefitting from the snow bonanza. As a snow/ice contractor, you have a chance to stick it to your customers. Or, you have a chance to feel their pain. What should you do? Make a bundle now or have them as customers next year when there's no snow to plow?

In the maintenance business, it's best to measure actions against long-term priorities. Choose your actions carefully with an empathetic ear

toward your customer's pain and an eye on keeping their trust. Consider these best practices:

- ▶ Remember the customer is still king and his or her point of view matters. To quote my partner, Tom Oyler, you need to “crawl behind the eyes of your customer.” Develop the skill of seeing things through the eyes of others and you are better able to develop your solutions for their problems.

- ▶ Learn to hear what the customer is not saying. Active listening is like reading between the lines. Sometimes you can learn more from what they're not telling you.

- ▶ Ask better questions. A weak answer comes from a weak question. Eliminate ambiguity by being direct, clear and avoiding ill-conceived messages. Ask important questions in person, not email. You can't read their body language in email.

- ▶ Customer eccentricities are part of the deal. Work with and around them to build trust.

- ▶ Develop listening posts at multiple levels. Have relationships at different levels in your customer's organization, such as owner to owner, account manager to facility manager, etc.

- ▶ Never overpromise. If you under deliver, it's a trust buster.

- ▶ When you have a service glitch—every company has them—admit it, fix it and move on.

- ▶ Hire employees with values that match yours. If you want to have your customers treated with respect and be treated honestly and fairly you must build a team of employees that does the same.

- ▶ Cost is not everything. Know where to skim and where to spend. Customer loyalty is built around the total customer experience from the sale, quality of service, knowing what the customer might like, the ability to deliver and trust.

- ▶ Build a sense of urgency in your organization. Most customers today expect you to have a sense of urgency about their problems and their issues when it comes to their service providers. If their budget cutbacks are top priority, this has to be your priority. Work together for a win-win.