



words, deeds and general interface with your team of employees — has created a positive or negative culture in terms of employee attitudes and opinions about the importance of maintaining satisfied customers. If negative, you simply need to acknowledge it. Making changes for the better will also take time.

To a psychologist, you'll be creating a paradigm shift. Defined, a paradigm shift is a "radical change in a person's basic assumptions about something," like the importance of creating and maintaining customer satisfaction. Most companies will acknowledge the need to change but find the process overwhelming. Still, it has been done and, as a long-term business strategy aimed at ultimately greater profits, is being done today.

Building satisfaction

To build customer satisfaction, look at the following areas:

1. What is your customer satisfaction level today? Focus groups and surveys can help you find out. Talking to individual customers when there are no problems is also useful.



GROWTH GOALS

1. Spend time initiating the customer satisfaction change process.
2. Monitor small changes to ensure progress vs. goals.
3. Keep talking to front-line people. Input is important.
4. Step up communications with customers. Look for positives.
5. Meet frequently to relay and build on positives.
6. Measure results continually, and react.

2. Get staff input. Blind input taken from your staff can be unbelievably revealing.

3. Look at cancellations and referral trends. Then, sit down and consider what changing your customer satisfaction strategy will be like.

Know that your team members will resist. Change often requires people do more. If the value of change to the individual is not pre-sold and backed up by action, it won't work.

Prepare to spend extra time and money initiating the

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A LOYALTY BOOST

Here are a few innovative ways to improve customer loyalty:

- 1. Establish a customer focus group.** Invite some customers to a periodic meeting and provide incentives.
- 2. Host an off-site meeting for key customers.** Find out how you are meeting their needs; build relationships.
- 3. Talk to your front-line people.** Most of the time they know the problems and the solutions.
- 4. Collect e-mail addresses.** People are more likely to read and respond to e-mail. Periodically send updates, tips, facts and stories to your client list.
- 5. Make your direct mail stand out.** No mailing labels; use colorful stamps.
- 6. Discover your competition.** Talk to your competitors and your competitor's customers. Pizza Hut didn't begin delivering pizzas until Domino's arrived on the scene.
- 7. Steal ideas.** Look for new business or marketing ideas from other companies. Don't only look at similar businesses.
- 8. Be different.** Stand out from the

crowd. Some ideas: Send complimentary movie tickets to best customers on opening weekends with a thank-you note, send gifts to customers on the anniversary date they started doing business with you, send disposable cameras with your logos to customers including a photo of you so they have a thank you message when they develop the film, and send customers poinsettias during the holidays.

- 9. Survey customers.** Ritz-Carlton hotels and Pizza Hut survey up to 40% of their customers each month to find out what they did and didn't like.
- 10. Write a column.** Hire a ghost writer or write a weekly or monthly column for a newspaper or trade journal.
- 11. Hire a key customer representative.** Appoint a special employee to keep in touch with your special customers.
- 12. Treat your employees the way you want your customers treated.** The front-line people are the most important people in your organization. If they feel management cares about them, they will reflect the same respect to your customers.

— Gregory Smith, a business motivation, training, development and leadership expert

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change process. Provide ongoing, visible support for change.

Then lay it all out on paper and communicate. Start with managers. Be sure you have 100% buy-in. Next, enlist support from veteran employees.

Once you initiate your strategy, take it one step at a time, using this guide:

- 1. Monitor small changes to ensure progress vs. goals.**
- 2. Keep talking to front-line people.** Input is important.
- 3. Step up communications with customers.** Look for positives.
- 4. Meet frequently to relay and build on positives.**
- 5. When one change has become part of the process, move on.**

Continuing satisfaction

Another important part of improving customer satisfaction is measuring results continually and then reacting to the information you gather. An example is responding to customers who answered negatively on satisfaction surveys with a goal of converting all negatives to positives over time.

Review all marketing materials. Evaluate your message and don't make claims you cannot live up to.

Next is sales. What are your people actually saying to prospective customers? Are they overpromising?

Continue to train your crews on communicating the real benefits of your services as well as handling customers contacts in the field and on the

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SUMMARY:

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I CAN'T GET NO ... SATISFACTION

phone. Benefits equal value, and value is what people pay for, not features.

Follow up to confirm each new sale is treated like a new baby in the family. Build the relationship based on early, positive "touch points."

Review the process for handling customer questions and complaints. Who is on the phones? How are incoming

contacts handled? Monitor all customer service contacts. Who did what and when? Was each question handled as it should have been?

Then, assign increased individual responsibility as staff members show positive results.

Establishing a customer satisfaction culture may seem like an insurmountable project. It can be. But it can — and is — being done.

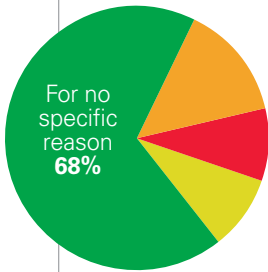
The payoff? Everyone wins: a happier staff and more satisfied customers. For ownership and senior management: greater profits in good times and bad. Isn't it worth another look? **LM**

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Here are some eye-opening facts about customer behavior and satisfaction:

- Forum Corporation showed that up to **40%** of the customers in its study who claimed they were satisfied switched suppliers without hesitation.
 - A *Harvard Business Review* study reported that **65% to 85%** of customers who switched suppliers said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their former supplier.
 - An average American company loses **15% to 20%** of its customers each year.
 - "Businesses can boost profits **25% to 85%** by increasing customer retention by as little as **5%**."
- Jill Griffin, author of *Customer Loyalty: How to Earn It, How to Keep It*

DEFECT Why do customers defect?



Because the company did not respond to their complaints **14%**

Because of the competition **9%**

Because they moved **9%**

Source: Rockefeller Study

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[SALES & MARKETING]

Marketing through a recession

Every business looking to thrive today needs solid strategies for finding new customers. BY JOE SHOONER

THE CURRENT ECONOMIC downturn has had marketers and business owners scratching their heads looking for new ways to motivate buyers. Every company looking to thrive in a recession needs a strategy for finding new customers and creating interest and revenue in spite of economic uncertainty. Though no single approach is a guaranteed winner for every business, some basic steps will guide you to greater success.

Call in the experts

A common thread running through the history of most successful green industry companies is the use of outside consultants. Since we tend to seek the path of least resistance to getting our production complete on a day-to-day basis, we're apt to develop operational blinders as a result.

Consultants have a wealth of experience with budgeting, operational systems and defining roles within an organization, but they're free of the baggage that can keep you tied to your status quo. Florida's Nanak's Landscaping, for example, has made extensive use of outside consultants over the last 20 years. President Sampuran Khalsa finds the assistance instrumental in building his company's financial structure. "For a smaller landscape company that cannot afford an in-house CFO, the right outside consultant can bring a high level

of analysis that can be instrumental in establishing healthy financial practices," Khalsa says.

There are plenty of consultants available to help guide your business through periods of growth and organizational challenges, but be sure to do your homework to determine what type of company they have the greatest success with. The needs of a commercial landscaper and that of a design/build contractor will vary greatly, and you should find a consultant who focuses on your type of business. Khalsa also warns about taking the short view with consultant relationships. "It is important for landscape company owners to realize an outside consultant is not a quick fix," he says. "It is best to establish a relationship and work together over the years."

Invest in your current customers

Any politician will tell you, "You don't win an election without securing the base." Likewise in business, it is more profitable to keep a current customer happy than it is to find a new one. Satisfied customers are the most valuable marketing assets you have. They provide a stable foundation of business on which to grow, they provide opportunities for recurring and expanding revenue streams, and they represent a tremendous potential for referrals.

According to a recent Accenture Study of Customer Service, 73% of



GROWTH GOALS

1. Put someone in charge of your marketing and have a plan.
2. Improve visibility and public image.
3. Invest in your current customers.

consumers who changed service providers did so due to poor service vs. 47% who left due to price. Keeping customers happy keeps their business.

According to Marty Grunder, owner of Grunder Landscaping Co.

in Dayton, OH, “you can’t give a client any reason to go looking elsewhere these days. When our clients say ‘jump,’ our teams jump. A lot of companies in all sectors are providing bad customer service because they’re

too worried about the future to pay attention to current clients. If you do good things for your customers, you can really stand out.”

Ask for feedback

Consumers are bombarded with marketing messages every day and can be distracted by your competition. Good communication from your organization



reinforces their buying decisions by reminding them you provide the easiest and best solution to their needs. In a larger company, you need to create a communication plan that utilizes print or electronic newsletters, follow-up phone calls and personal contact in a way that reinforces your client relationships. Ask about problems. If you solicit complaints, you diffuse potential anger and work toward a productive solution.

Ask for the referral

Satisfied customers are a tremendous source of potential business, but you have to ask for it. There is no shame in looking for work, and if you aren’t willing to ask a happy customer for help growing your business, who will you ask? Simple systems can aid in the process. For example, consider printing a self-addressed, postage-paid postcard with areas for your customer and their referral to fill in and mail back. Satisfied customers want to send you work, but you have to tell them you want it, and you have to make it easy for them to send it.

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mercial maintenance services or do you say you're providing an attractive environment for commercial tenants? Do you say you build patios or do you say you create living spaces to serve as a backdrop for countless good times with friends and families?

Successful communication requires identifying with the listener, and good marketing relies on the ability of the marketer to clearly promote the benefits of their services. Write down the services you offer. Then write down the benefits of each of those services. People buy benefits.

Put someone in charge of your marketing

The best person for your marketing position may already be working for you. Look for an employee who seems to "get it" and understands why people are buying from your company to begin with. An ideal marketing coordinator will be able to think like your clients in order to plan creatively for future marketing efforts. The owner generally has the clearest vision of the company's unique selling proposition and should be involved in the marketing plan. However, green industry business owners often have significant operational responsibilities and need to delegate marketing responsibilities to other individuals.

Develop marketing channels

Look at each segment of your client base as an individual channel to target. If you offer a diverse group of services, this segmentation can be done in terms of which services certain clients buy, leading you to develop mini marketing plans for individual types of consumers.

If you offer a narrower set of services, you'll need to develop a clear picture of who your buyers are. For example, Gary Donovan's TurfMasters has grown to one of the largest independent lawn care companies in Connecticut in just six years by avoiding diversification in favor of specialization. "We've developed a strong sense of who we are and, more importantly, who we aren't, which has allowed us to focus all our energy on our best prospects," Donovan says.

Go on the offensive

At the outset of the current economic downturn, many companies made a hasty decision to cut marketing expenses. If you look at marketing competition as a battle, this is equivalent to retreating. Every company needs to watch costs, but if other companies are reducing their marketing efforts, you have an immediate advantage by maintaining or increase yours.

Polish your public image

Ideally, your employees and vehicles will add to your company's professional image. Practically speaking, landscaping is a



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dirty job. Ask a friend or family member to drive by a couple of job sites and give you an outside perspective on the image your employees are portraying. Based on what you learn, develop a written policy for appearance on the job site.

It's a small part of successful marketing that's consistently overlooked.

Become more visible

Opportunities abound for landscape companies to provide community ser-

vice. Schools, churches and community groups of all sorts can use your help. If your locale has a community vegetable garden program, volunteer to prep beds in return for posting a sign with your company name and logo. Or, visit ProjectEvergreen.com/gcft and become a GreenCare for Troops volunteer. Through GreenCare for Troops, you can donate services to a family with a loved one on active duty in the military.

Use job site signs

Job site signs are a simple and effective means of communication. Posting signs enables neighbors to see a new landscape installation and immediately get a visual referral to your company. You can also post a sign to mark a job in progress, which is a good idea if you're on the property for more than a week.

Say thanks

Thanking your customers is one of the easiest things you can do to improve your image. It's also the right thing to do. Our businesses only operate because of our clients, so show your appreciation. I prefer to pick up the phone, though handwritten notes and e-mails do the job as well. The key is to be sincere.

Act like success matters

"More than anything else — more than tactics, more than money — marketing is a matter of will," Donovan says. "It's creating a will and a desire in your organization to succeed, and then using that attitude to outthink and outwork your competition." The culture of a company is created by its leadership. As an owner, you need to lead your army into the competitive marketplace by example. Create a marketing plan and champion it to your staff. Then work harder and smarter than your competition. *LM*

SHOONER is vice president of sales for Focal Point Communications, Cincinnati, OH. Contact him at joeshooner@growpro.com or 800-525-6999.

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[SALES & MARKETING]

When good referrals turn bad

WITH ALL OF the effort you are putting forth to excel in your career, there's nothing worse than wasting a perfectly good referral that was hand delivered to you by a happy customer (associate, friend, family member, and so on).

There are a few things you can do to destroy a referral and any possibility for a sale: poor follow up, poor service, a comment you made to the referral that you were better off keeping to yourself, or a sales tactic that turned the warm referral into a cold fish.

Think about what destroying that referrals costs you. The most obvious cost would be the loss of a perfectly good selling opportunity. However, there's much more at stake that you stand to lose.

Think about the person on your referral team (a select group of individuals who provide you with a steady stream of referrals). This person is putting their neck on the line for you. Once your referral source gets wind of what happened, you can bet this will be the last time that person ever sends you another referral. It not only costs you one possible sale but all of the potential future sales that you have lost because you compromised the relationship you have with your referral source.

To take it one step further, what if it was a customer who sent you this referral? How does this customer now perceive you? Demonstrating this less than admirable trait to a customer may change their once positive perception of you and tarnish the trust and confidence they had in you. Not only have you lost the chance of getting any future referrals from them but you now run the risk of losing this customer's future business that you would have normally earned.

How to protect and encourage continued referrals and sales.

BY KEITH ROSEN

Just like your customers, referrals are a privilege, not a right. You don't automatically deserve referrals, you have to earn them regardless of how long you've been in your position, known someone or how much work you've already done for a customer.

Keep in mind the players on your referral team are doing you the favor, so make sure you appreciate their efforts in a measurably visible way. They are the ones who are taking time out of their busy schedule to help you.

The biggest blunder people make is, once they start getting referrals, they forget to thank the person who provided them. Thank each person on your referral team when you:

1 Get the referral. Call with words of thanks or send a thank you card letting them know how much you appreciate

ate them thinking of you and taking the time out of their busy day to send you a referral. Reinforce the fact that each referral will be taken care of and given the exemplary service and attention that every one of your customers deserve.

2 Meet with the referral. After you connect with the referred prospect, call or send a thank you card as well as an update on where each referral stands as it relates to your selling cycle.

3 Turn the referral into a customer. Once the sale is made and the referral becomes a customer, rather than waiting until you have completed this project, immediately call your referral source and send a thank you card. This way, you are the first person to let them know their referral is now a customer of yours, rather than having your referral source hear it from the person who they referred to you.

Before you know it, you may not have to market or prospect as much as you think due to the influx of referrals you are generating. **LM**

ROSEN is a business author, trainer and coach, and president of Profit Builders. He can be reached at 888-262-2450 or info@profitbuilders.com.



GROWTH GOALS 1. Ask for referrals. 2. **Protect your referral team, thanking them regularly.** 3. Follow-through with referred potential customers. 4. **Turn referrals into customers.**

