How To Scare Customers

By JON PICOULT

Customer-experience expert Jon Picoult helped us identify 10 ways that businesses often terrify their clients:

Respond to Customers like a Zombie

Are your responses to customer inquiries heavily scripted as if they came out of some low-budget horror movie? Do your customers feel like no matter what they say, they get form letters and rote messages in response? Do your policies disengage members of your staff from active listening, critical thinking and personalized problem solving? If customer-service personnel perform like zombies, you can guarantee that customers will run from them.

Communicate Like a Machine

Businesspeople are steeped in the practices and language of their respective industries. As such, they often forget to translate their communications for easy public consumption. Instead, they convey their messages using jargon, terminology and acronyms that make their customers' head spin.

Run a Skeleton Staff

Particularly in times of economic distress when profits need to be propped up, many companies' first reaction is to slash their operations staff. But while a bare-bones staff is cheaper to run, it also translates into delays, unreturned phones calls, overall inattentive service, and low staff morale – characteristics that are hardly the ingredients for great customer experiences.

Set Monstrous Goals

Business transformation is overrated. It's good to have high aspirations and stretch goals, but large scale overhauls – of a company's brand, its operations, or it technology – frequently bring firms to their knees, rather than catapulting them past competitors. To avoid scaring your loyal customers away with radical changes, do some experiments first. Never underestimate the power and efficiency of incremental advances toward it.

Never Do a Post-mortem

In the whirlwind of daily business activities, people rarely take the time to dissect and diagnose customer complaints. That's a shame. Complaints present a wonderful opportunity to not just recover gracefully (and perhaps win back a consumer's loyalty), but to identify the root cause of a problem and fix it. Bonus tip: What's even rarer than conducting a post mortem after a customer complaint? Examining customer compliments. There's great value in pinpointing what employee or business practice produced a happy client and then figuring out how to replicate that outcome more routinely.

Suck the Lifeblood Out of People

To create happy, satisfied, and loyal customers, you need happy, satisfied and engaged employees. Create a work environment where employees don't feel appreciated, respected, or well-equipped to do their jobs, and you're guaranteed to drain them of energy and passion. A focus on a larger vision, work-life balance, and active mentoring will help you to keep workers motivated and feeling happy.

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Don't Tell Clients What's Lurking Around the Corner

Creating satisfied, loyal customers is a lot about managing expectations. People's frustration (or delight) with a business is closely tied to the expectations they have going into an transaction. Customers don't like ambiguity or unpleasant surprises. If you don't tell them what to expect – how long they'll be on hold, how much paperwork they'll need to fill out, when they'll hear back from you, etc. – then they're more likely to be annoyed when the interaction isn't as quick, simple or straightforward as anticipated.

Pull a Few Too Many Tricks

Does your business ever try to trick its customers with short cuts in service, special offers that exclude desirable merchandise, or fine print that can't be understood? these are examples of "tricks of the trade" that may draw customers in momentarily, but won't create a foundation on which to build loyal relationships. It is always better to under-promise and over-deliver.

Avoid Accountability like the Plague

Have you ever heard a staff member tell a customer that fixing a problem was outside the scope of his or her particular job? A lack of accountability can be a gruesome disease if left untreated. Customer calls are not promptly (if ever) returned. Commitments are not kept. Obligations are forgotten. Want to create a brand experience that outshines all others? Make sure everyone in your company is prepared to accept responsibility when something goes awry.

Up-sell Relentlessly

Do some of your customers think your organization is always after them to close another sale? No matter how sophisticated your point-of-sale systems are, how advanced your segmentation strategy is, or how dazzling your advertising campaigns appear – it means nothing if the people interacting with your customers are not genuinely helpful.

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Is Your House Haunted?

Don't fret: You can turn around your relationships with customers by committing to a higher level of service, identifying were your company comes up short, and inspiring and training your employees to do better. These 10 tips were provided by Jon Picoult, the founder of Watermark Consulting, a Connecticut-based consulting firm that helps businesses improve the customer experience.