

Surprise, Surprise - Give Your Customers the Unexpected

MAY 14, 2009

The key to building customer loyalty is to find the right balance between the expected and the unexpected.

I like surprises. And I must have a lot of company in that regard, since "surprise your customers" is an oft-repeated piece of advice given to entrepreneurs. In fact, I did a Google search on those exact three words and got a mind blowing 14,400,000 results.

Surprising your customers is good, since that usually means you're exceeding their expectations. And that pretty much guarantees your customers will be back. This concept is not all that complicated — it's all about thinking differently and delivering (or overdelivering) the unexpected. That bar — the level of what is expected — changes rapidly these days, so you can't ever rest on your laurels.

For example, many online shoppers now expect a "free shipping" offer when they order. But offering free shipping for returns, while becoming more common, is still somewhat of a pleasant surprise and can help push the customer to buy. Internet giant Zappos.com has perfected this. Read the customer comments on this shoe-selling site. Over and over customers report how happy they are with their Zappos experience. (Going to websites and reading customer comments is a great way to learn about good — and bad — business practices.)

Rewarding your best customers via a surprise can be especially worth your while. This can come in the form of a promotional e-mail offering a truly great deal. But for the offer to be really appreciated, let your important customers know this isn't a deal you make to just anybody. If some customers are indeed special, you need to tell them so. Call them platinum customers or something else that defines their special status.

Spread the love around though. Taking care of even your most casual customers can quickly turn them into loyal shoppers. Two friends of mine manufacture and sell sunglasses. They're not high-end; most cost less than \$20 a pair. Yet the company offers a lifetime replacement guarantee. They repair or replace any of their sunglasses and only charge a small shipping fee. That guarantee is surprising given the low price of the product, but it certainly creates customer loyalty.

But don't get so caught up in trying to spring surprises on your customers that you forget to pay attention to your core business, to what your customers expect from you. Think about Cracker Jack. While many delight in the surprise packed in each box, that's not what's sold millions of boxes of the

sweet treat. If people didn't like the taste of the candied popcorn, the special gift wouldn't mean anything. It's the packaging of both the expected and unexpected that has propelled Cracker Jack to success.

The key — you can't beat expectations until you meet them. So how do you do both? Don't make the all-too-common mistake of thinking it's all about customer service. If your products or services are lacking, no amount of excellent customer service is going to make up for it. Conversely, lousy customer service will adversely affect companies offering even the best products or services.

Every May in Southern California, the Jacarandas burst into bloom. It happens like clockwork, and yet seeing these trees covered in bright purple flowers never ceases to delight me. I know they're coming; I even look for them. But the first moment I see all the trees in bloom (they tend to plant them in groups), I am always a bit surprised.

Smart entrepreneurs will strive to do the same. Is there something special you can offer your clients and customers on a somewhat regular basis that they will look forward to year after year? Perhaps you can hold an annual contest and give away something of value. Or, if you're a local business, stage an event or raise money for a charity or nonprofit. Retailers can hold special sales (just make sure they're truly "special"). Nordstrom customers eagerly anticipate their half-yearly sales, because of their rarity.

Many businesses talk about customer satisfaction. While that sounds like a lofty goal, to create a truly dedicated customer base, you have to go beyond merely satisfying your customers and come up with ways to surprise and delight them — to add that special "something" that helps you stand out from your competitors and build unshakeable loyalty.