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## *Give your business the gift that keeps on giving: customer service*

The holiday season is upon us, and for many businesses, it is the time of year that determines whether red or black ink will flow in the annual books.

For many industries, such as electronics, clothing and jewelry, the last month or two of the year dictates financial success. As much as 15 percent to 25 percent of their revenue falls in December alone. Businesses frequently come into contact with more customers in this holiday rush season than at any other time of the year. Although it is difficult to provide stellar customer service when you are at your busiest, it is the most important time of the year to do so! You may never have another chance at these customers.

Let's look at some examples of customer service offered during the holiday. These examples range from the good to the bad to the ugly!

- Last Christmas, I bought some glassware in Chicago and had it shipped to Kansas City. One glass broke. The business re-shipped it without requesting the broken item to be returned. It broke, too. So we went through the process again, and this time the glass was intact. Do you think I will buy from them again? You bet. Will I tell my friends? Only a few dozen!

- How about the businesses that offer a 30-day return policy throughout the year but don't extend it at the holidays? I like to shop early, but at some stores,

I can't because then my gift can't be returned if it isn't right. They just don't get my business at the holidays.

- Have you ever rushed to take advantage of a good deal only to find out that it was a one-day affair and that you got there the day before or after? How frus-



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trating. A major sporting goods store in town always took their coupons even if recently expired—they knew the point was to generate revenue and offer customers an incentive to buy from them, not make customers juggle their overbooked calendars!

- Finally, I took advantage of a great holiday offer and bought four electronic gadgets that came with rebates. I sent them all in with the mountains of paperwork required for them to be processed in eight to 10 weeks. When the payoff finally came, they sent only one rebate.

The company assumed that they were all duplicates because they came in the same envelope and required me to resubmit

them all. It is a good thing I am a pack rat and keep all receipts and copies! In the end, I had to submit three separate times to get them all paid! Was it worth it? I am not sure. This year, I am avoiding rebates and looking for instant savings!

Good customer service is not just for retailers. It's for any business that wants customers to come back. Whether you sell to end consumers or business customers, or whether you even have a seasonal cycle, it is always wise to carefully assess whether you are adding to or alleviating the holiday stress your customers already feel.

No business can afford to let the busy holiday season be an excuse for less than ideal customer service. As you can see from the examples, customer service is really about customer care and putting the needs of the customer right smack in the middle of the business's operating policies. To do that requires forethought, not reaction.

A few things to think about in the off-season:

Is customer service a differentiator for your business? Do you count on customer service to distinguish you from other alternatives the customer has? If so, you can't afford not to "raise the bar" of customer service delivery every year. Study those that do it best, and ask yourself what practices you can adopt for your business. Challenge yourself to improve at least one aspect of customer service every year!

To deliver credible customer service during your busy season requires the following steps:

- When you set up your operating policies, ask how it affects the customer. What would the customer expect? Try to meet or exceed those expectations. Things such as shipping policies, return policies, rebates and sales offers do matter.

- When you plan for the holiday rush, buy enough supplies, hire enough people, and train them thoroughly.

- When training, train employees in policies, process and politeness. Share your values so they understand how you would want them to handle a situation not covered in the policy manual.

- When you market your business, stand behind your promises, and make sure offers are not so limited that they frustrate more than excite customers.

For the businesses that plan ahead for the holiday season, know that this busy holiday season is earning you new satisfied customers and a customer base to build on for years to come!

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