

Guest Column

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Defining Loyalty

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Every business has loyal customers, but how far does it go? Is it loyalty to you and your staff, or to your product or service, or is it to your brand? Does that loyalty run deep and show up if you need help (road construction making it hard to get to you, a natural disaster, break-in or fire—do your people still show up for you)? Or does the loyalty only run as long as it's convenient? Why does having that deep, strong loyalty matter so much and how can you create it within all the avenues of your business?

We love participating in community events like walking in our local Homecoming parade and handing out

flowers (instead of candy). It was a hit in our town!

When your customers know you, they shop with you. When they trust you, they spend more with you. When they're invested, they refer you and cheer you on while spending with you.

Growing up in the business I didn't realize what kind of loyalty from our customers my family had. I didn't realize the power of it until my father's funeral. The amount of customers who showed up to the service and then offered their help at the store to get us through after was humbling and overwhelming in the best ways possible. As a young 20-something just starting to come up the ranks, it has stayed with me ever since.

Through the years, my community and customers have shown up for me to help clean up and rebuild after a tornado, and kept me open when two rounds of road construction made it almost impossible to find my entrance. They rallied in COVID, and along the way I found that many of them have said my name in places that I didn't even know my services were being talked about.

Now, let's be honest, after my dad had passed away there was a shift and a lot of customers who were loyal to him weren't the same loyal to me. I had to earn that, and in a small town, that isn't always easy. But over time I've won some of them back and created a new loyalty network to call upon and cheer me on. Here are my secrets from the last 20 years.

It starts with you. Are you transparent in your business practices? Do you have honest conversations on the floor about how your business is going or pricing? I'm not saying that you have to give the all the office details, but honesty about things being slow or a little scary with the road construction opens a door to show that you're human, too. If you're willing to be vulnerable with them it shows that you trust them. Do you speak from experience about your products and tell them that you aren't familiar with something or do you make something up to get the sale? There's a respect given and received when you don't sell a product just to get it out of your inventory. You're out for them to do well, not the dollar.

Do you volunteer at community or school events? Getting involved in making your community better, from park builds to festival committees to sponsoring programs at the school or sports teams, all show the people in those areas that you're supporting them and you're invested. It's important to be seen at events helping, but do it because you care—people can tell the difference when someone cares and when they're just there for the credit.

Get to know your customers. We all have our regulars, but what about the ones that only come in for a season or for a specific product—do you know them, too? Do you remember their order from year to year? Is there a way to cross it over into other seasons? Do you know their spouses, kids or grandkids? Do you celebrate with them or sit with them in their darkest times? We celebrate potty training wins, weddings, graduations and promotions on the regular, but at least once a week I'm a sounding board for someone's heavy, hard thing happening in their life. I used our loyalty program to learn so many first names and over the years it has brought smiles to people when they come in and feel like they matter. Some I only know from their greens order that they put out at the cemetery each Christmas. How can you show up for them throughout the year to remind them that you see them?

Be consistent. Show up as a business that cares about their community and customers. Consistently treat customers the same with the same rule book. Consistently offer the same products, services, classes, environment, respect, support, operating hours. When you're consistent, they see the baseline and can rely on you for XYZ. If something changes like a product or service or hours, lean back to transparency—give them the reason for the change. You become the go-to source because they can count on you.

Tell your story. Tell them why you do what you do and why you bring the product lines that you do. Help them see your vision. Sharing your passions will help you connect to different people in different ways. Someone who's passionate about organic vegetables may be different than someone who lives for that perfect lawn. If you tap into different crew members for different categories and bridge that loyalty throughout the company, people will start to notice and talk (positively) about the business that loves what they do and doesn't just sell you junk.

How can you make this work in your business when everyone's business is so different and not just retail? Simple gestures and kindness go a long way in every field, but look for ways to tailor your programs to customers. Use your staff and give them room to make someone's day better if they're struggling. As the business owner you can't always be everywhere to make those connections, but you can attract staff who does. Building loyalty in your business starts with you and the trust you build. Over time you'll see people return or refer you for your products, services, classes and other offerings. **GP**

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