

Features

2/27/2014

The Search for the Perfect Response

Anne-Marie Hardie

In an ideal world, each customer concern would have a true-and-tested response. This response would leave the customer fully satisfied and the employee would feel confident that he/she met the customer's needs.

In fact, the opposite often occurs. When employees become too reliant in following a script, they fail to pay attention to the customer's needs. So instead of leaving satisfied, the customer may either become more agitated or simply leave feeling hurt and unheard.

So is there a place for scripting? Yes and no. John Kennedy, founder of Upselling Green and John Kennedy Consulting, advocates for creating a list of company standards that employees both understand and live by. These standards should be consistent with creating a positive customer experience. In fact, John emphasizes in order for a script to be successful, the employee needs to become familiar with the message and make it his or her own.

What Does Your Customer Need?

Instead of trying to respond to the customer's questions, take a moment to discover the need that the customer is communicating to you. By fulfilling this need, you'll be on the pathway to forming a long-term customer relationship.

"When guests come to Sheridan Nurseries asking advice, they are actually seeking solutions," says Brenda Luckhardt, Business-to-Business Marketing and Development Manager at Sheridan Nurseries in Toronto, Ontario. "When our staff responds we want to be able to provide complete solutions so that the guest's garden experience is a positive one." Sheridan Nurseries is committed to providing complete customer care solutions.

This belief also resonates strongly with the multi-store employee-owned and operated Armstrong Garden Center in California. Armstrong Regional Manager Eric Asakawa shares that they are 100% committed to an enhanced customer service experience. This garden center meets the customer needs by providing a variety of services from the Ultimate Guarantee to personal shoppers.

So what are the top customer needs? On average, customers are probably coming to your garden centers for

one of the following five reasons:

I Need Validation: Did I Make the Right Choice?

Common Concern: Unsatisfied with a product (product not working, plant died/sick)

This type of customer service query is probably the one that most in the field would rather avoid. These customers may either be upset or agitated, or progress to these heightened emotions when their needs aren't met. The irony is, these individuals are probably the easiest ones to satisfy.

These customers are not looking for a detailed explanation or a lot of information. In fact, they usually want two things—to be listened to and confirmation that their concern will be resolved.

Response Tips:

Make eye contact

Take the time to listen

Apologize

Say what you can do, start with a Yes

Give them more than they expected

I Need Information

Common Questions: What is this plant? I found this insect, is it beneficial/harmful? How can I get my orchid to bloom again?

These customers are coming to you as experts in this field. They're looking for answers to their question. Your job is to find out the answer; if you don't know the answer personally, find someone who does.

Response Tips:

"That's a great question, let's go find out the answer!"

Discover the answer (use both people and technical resources).

If referring to another individual, stay with the customer and listen to the response.

After finding the response, ask, "How else may I help?"

Offer a takeaway: a pamphlet, copy of a web page or an upcoming course. Any item that can provide the client with additional information about their concern.

I Need Guidance

Common Questions: What do I plant in a shade area? What are some low-maintenance plants? Can you help me determine a landscape plan for my home?

Slightly different from the information seekers, these customers are looking for ideas, recommendations and suggestions, but not a concrete answer. Show these customers options, but don't tell them what to do.

Response Tips:

Ask some more questions to further understand the customer's personal interests? For example: What are some of your favorite plants? What is your favorite color? What would your dream garden look like?

Take a tour and guide the customer to items that might fit their needs.

Pay attention to the items in which the customer is interested. Use this information to further guide your customer.

Offer more, whether it's personal shopping, landscape design, upcoming courses or product recommendations.

I Need a Teacher

Common Questions: Can you show me how to build a pond? How can I create a container garden? Can you teach me how to build a Christmas urn?

These customers usually have some basic knowledge, but want to expand it. They're looking to become actively involved both at your garden center and at home. Address these customers' needs by offering seminars and workshops that teach a skill.

Response Tips:

Offer both hands-on experience, if possible, and visual learning (demonstrations).

Provide supporting takeaway materials.

Leave the customer with a takeaway: a finished product (making an urn), a discount (20% off on pond products for attending a pond seminar) or even a small gift certificate.

I Need to Feel Valued

Unspoken Questions: Will you remember me? Will you make me feel valued and special? Do I feel a part of your community?

Although this need is generally unspoken, it's one that's commonly shared with most of your returning customers. Remember to value each customer experience. Look them in the eye, smile, find out their name and then remember it. John recommends being the first to welcome an individual to the store and if there's an issue, being the first to apologize.

"Responding to a customer's need is a great chance to reinforce the relationship and make a stronger buying opportunity for the next time around, and a perfect chance to upsell a product or service while they are there," John says. "They traveled back to seek insight. Respect the effort they are making by making an extra effort on the garden center end." **GP**

Anne-Marie Hardie is a freelance writer/speaker from Barrie, Ontario, and part of the third generation of the family-owned garden center/wholesale business Bradford Greenhouses in Barrie/Bradford, Ontario.