

# It's time to get cracking on customer care

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In this series of Supermarket & Retailer's articles, we share stories of what some organisations and managers have done to motivate and inspire their teams. We give you practical ideas of what you can do to create the most amazing, customer-driven company in the world.

**W**ith Black Friday now behind us, most retailers have probably started planning for the hoped-for Christmas shopping rush, and the 'back-to-school' 2022 straight afterwards. So while the operational and logistical capacities of your business, as well as your marketing and promotional activities, are also in high gear, it's worth putting some basic plans in place to make sure that your customers' experiences are so compelling and delightful that they will want to return again and again.

It has been another year of turmoil for everyone and some businesses have insisted on sharing their misery, pessimism and despair with anyone who will listen. Customers feel betrayed by the occasional mean, cynical and greedy behaviour of many companies.



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But you have a chance to be different – to be an oasis in the desert of customer despair. Right now is a wonderful opportunity for you to do something quite spectacular and to give your customers something that they will never forget. Your kindness, warmth, thoughtfulness and helpfulness, or the little surprises that you arrange, will be remembered long after the hard times are over.

The good news is that all customer care efforts are much easier to achieve than your other

strategies. I've repeated this sentiment many times in these columns. When you look at the things that irritate customers on the one hand, and the things that excite and thrill customers on the other, it's inevitably the small details, the little acts of kindness or sensitivity to their needs, wants and desires that win your customers' loyalty. It's a low-cost approach, but it's high on impact and now is the perfect time ... because Christmas and the new year are all about new beginnings.



Customers are not unreasonable ... they know that this time of the year is a big event, and will in all likelihood forgive things like long queues, some items being temporarily out of stock, and even endless repeats of Boney M Christmas songs. But they will not forgive the apathy and indifference of business people who don't acknowledge their patience, nor the shrugging of shoulders in feigned helplessness when they ask for help.

Some examples of little service treats include ...

- Remember basic courtesy and warmth towards customers ... greeting them, thanking them, and using their names. Ask them simple questions about their family, work, stresses, and show some interest in their lives. Alternatively, you can pay them a compliment or say something nice to them. Little personal touches make a huge difference. Show some empathy and understanding for the pressures they are under. Remember that it's a two-way street – if you are nice to them, they will be nice back to you.
- Lay out the red carpet for their arrival. Those first few seconds are probably the most important time in their shopping experience. When they arrive, it should be a big deal. In what ways can you bring out the red carpet? Maybe you pay someone whose only task is to greet and smile. But you can go further by treating them like celebrities too: There are photographers, ask them for a selfie, or do something that makes them feel they are important. Sadly, when we arrive at a place of business, we're lucky to even get someone to look at us. Treat your customers like stars by showing them you're glad they came.
- Provide little gifts and free stuff. At every celebrity event or expo, people walk away with gift bags filled with products and gifts. It doesn't have to be worth thousands, and you don't even have to pay for these yourself if you get your suppliers to sponsor them. But doing something for ordinary customers also makes a difference.

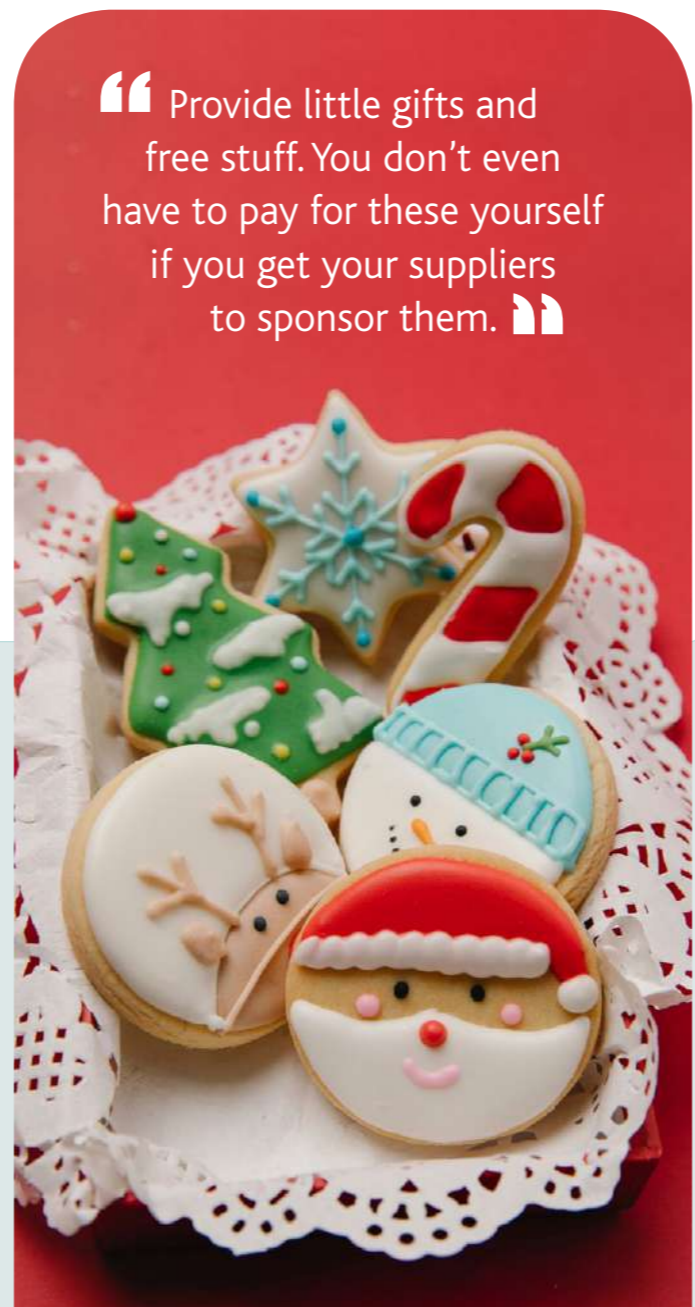


Image of fish: Laura James, Pexels

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Ben & Jerry's, an ice-cream shop chain in the USA, hold a 'Free Cone Day' every once in a while. Virgin Atlantic does something similar with a bag of goodies – even for economy class passengers. One dry cleaner will wash your suit for free if you are unemployed. What gifts can you give your customers?

- Be creative with little gifts that don't cost your company a fortune: one small Christmas decoration that they can add to their tree; a little booklet giving them advice or some hints about something related to what you do; your staff taking some time out to go and help customers in

their busy times, like walking them to the car or taxi rank; different packaging or uniforms when your staff deliver even the most mundane products; recipes for spicy buns or mince pies that they can try at home; free baby-sitting service while your customers run around in shopping malls or trying to fulfil their tasks; decorate your trucks or delivery vehicles; the list is endless.

- Keep in touch afterwards, if possible. Phoning or texting a customer who has placed a big order for an electronic appliance, some furniture, or stocking up on expensive holiday treats afterwards is so exceptional that they are bound to appreciate it – and show their loyalty to your business. (I just heard a great example of this kind of thinking from a blood transfusion service in Sweden. Like most other blood banks, donors are thanked in a text after their donation. But this service takes it one step further: when your blood has actually made it into a fellow-human being's veins, you also get an automated text telling you a little bit about what happened. I don't need to tell you what a difference this has made to repeat donations.)
- Support those in need in your community by inviting your customers to donate a food or clothing item in exchange for a discount on your products or services. People love to be generous, especially at this time of the year.

Customers may not have time to notice these little things immediately, but they will be remembered and remarked on. Do your best to uplift them and tell them what a difference they are making.

But these small staff-driven interventions are always under-estimated by business, especially when we are under pressure. We always look to the big things that managers control – are the credit card facilities at the tills working, are the shelves properly stocked, is the business secure from criminals, have we sorted out the rebates

and discounts on promotional items, and so on? Interventions requiring major investment are quite expensive, especially for the basic goals that the business must achieve. But these big interventions don't always impact on the customers' experience, and are probably imitated by your competitors anyway.

Little day-by-day service treats handed out by smiling, service-focused staff can't be replicated by your rivals because they are spontaneous and heartfelt. Your customers see many examples of shoddy service from other suppliers. When the opposite occurs in your business, you will shine out like a beacon of hope in their lives, and you will be justly rewarded for your customer care.

Would you prefer to be the Grinch that stole Christmas – or be remembered for something else?

So you constantly need to ask: What else can we do to add some value for our customers without breaking the bank? What can we do to make their lives a little more convenient or easier, or that will have a positive impact on their lives? What can we do to make our customers want to tell other people about us? What will make them – maybe 20 years from now – say, "Wow! I still can't believe what they did for me." What can we do to make them feel loved, wanted and appreciated?

Can you remember what it was like at Christmas when you were a child? Can you remember the fun and excitement of this special time when you were

on school holidays, and when there was just so much happening around you? Everything seemed to just have much more colour and light, and there was so much anticipation and enthusiasm as you prepared for that special day. Even the poorest of parents tried to do something nice for their children at this special time. Being together with lots and lots of family and eating far too much was what made it so special. **SR**



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