



Jody Padgham

I'm Right and You're Wrong: Do's and Don'ts in Customer Service

A customer walked into a grocery, with a greasy bag in her hand. "I want to talk to the meat manager," she whined.

"That's me," Mr. Smith says. "How can I help you?"

"I bought this roasted chicken last week, and it was terrible. I want my money back."

"I am so sorry," Mr. Smith replied. "Let me get you a new chicken and give you a \$10 gift certificate to use when you return to our store."

"Why did you do that?" John, the assistant manager asks. "We don't even sell that brand of chicken—she probably got it at the market across town."

"You bet she did," notes Mr. Smith, "but don't you think that she'll be shopping here from now on, and with a smile on her face?"

No doubt you have heard the phrase "the customer is always right." As frustrating as it can be, have you taken those words to heart in your attitude toward your customers? Does the story to the left irk you or make sense to you? Is the customer always right in your business dealings?

When taking on the role of a direct marketer of your own products, you are also stepping into the position of customer service and customer satisfaction manager of your business. Many farmers find that although they are very skilled at producing a quality product, the process of selling that product to others can be very challenging. Much of your success in direct marketing revolves around your attitude toward your customers and the way that you choose to serve them.

We all participate in the consumer industry every day. Bring to mind of clerks or business managers that you enjoy working with. Do they greet you by name, involve you in conversation? Answer your questions in a straightforward way? Seem approachable and knowledgeable?

Now think of the last clerk with whom you had an unpleasant interaction. Was the person perhaps on the phone with non-work business, rude or non-communicative? Curt? Shy? Not willing to look you in the eye? Act as though you were bothering them?

In many surveys, customers say that good customer service is more important to them than low prices in dictating overall satisfaction. This is especially true when connected to a quality product.

Think about the two different kinds of clerks as you prepare yourself to deal with your customers. What kind of service would *you* like to get?

Key elements to successful customer service

- Communicate clearly. Be sure all prices are well marked, signage is clear and the proper size. Make changes if they are recommended!
- Be accessible; return phone calls and e-mails in a timely manner.
- Understand what the customer wants. Bag items in appropriate sizes, cut up items if requested, be sure everything is packaged neatly. Make reasonable changes if the customer asks.
- Make sure both the seller and the product have a clean, neat appearance. Farmer overalls are okay, but they *must* be clean!
- Be proud of what you do! If you are the wallflower type, ask your vibrant 15-year-old to be the primary sales person at the front of the market stand. Show people that you enjoy producing food for them, that you are excited and happy to be bringing it to them.

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- Follow the rules. Adhere to all weighing, cleanliness and food safety regulations. Keep weighing and packaging surfaces clean and uncluttered. Be sure scales are accurate and clean, packaging is neat and appropriate for the product.

In selling direct to customers you have the great advantage of being able to communicate directly with them. Not many people that produce a product can do this. Be sure to take advantage of the contact. How can you best enhance this connection?

- Ask your customers what they think of your product or service, through surveys or comment sheets.
- Explain your farm philosophy in detail and why what you do is different from anyone else. Make a brochure with lots of cute photos that explains who you are and what you do. Give it to all of your customers.
- Consider creating a newsletter that goes out to customers once, twice a year, or more often. Include recipes, farm updates and news of the family so that your customers make a connection to you and your farm.

- Create events at the farm for folks to visit in person and see where their food comes from. Lots of people today are looking for a reason to connect with the country, farms and food. Let them feel a sense of connection with you.

If you work to develop relationships with your customers, they will shower you with loyalty. If you listen to their needs and respond to their requests, not only will you ensure a market for what you produce, but you will benefit from the connection with people that support what you do for them. Work to make them happy, and they in turn will give you the support you need to thrive.

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