

## **Small-business Savvy: Customer Shopping Assistance**

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How often have you entered a store only to experience one of these two scenarios? You can't find anyone to help you or a salesperson descends on you and just won't go away so you can shop.

You hear a lot about the importance of customer service. Yet, much of what you read and hear is in terms of "after the purchase" support. The question addressed here is how you or your staff can best help customers while they are making their decision.

Why is this important? That's because the more you can assist customers to make the best decision at this stage means the fewer customers coming back with a complaint or the fewer who are offering negative comments to their friends and co-workers.

Understand that helping the customer who walks in the door is a tough job. You don't know if the person is a serious shopper or if he or she is just browsing. Even if you determine the person is a serious shopper, you probably don't know where he or she is in the purchasing process. Is the person just starting and gathering information or down to picking between choice A or B?

Perhaps the customer already know what he or she wants and is deciding where to buy it.

Getting answers to these and other questions about the customer's intentions is key to a successful interaction. Such information comes through two sources. The first source of information is asking questions and then actively listening to what the customer said. Greet your customers as they enter the store and ask if you can be of help. Listen hard to the answer for clues to guide your next action.

The second source of information comes from body language. Does the customer comment that he or she needs no help but then stands there looking around? This may be a sign the person does need a little help but doesn't want to have someone following his or her every footstep. I am reading a book by Bill Bryson, "The Road to Little Dribbling," in which he comments on some retailers who feel the need to blurt advice whether wanted or not.

The information you gather from customers should guide you. If the customer indicates a desire to be left alone, honor that wish. However, don't abandon the person. Again, watch the body language and check back. If you hear again that he or she just wants to browse, listen but be available. When a customer does determine he or she needs some help, research shows the person doesn't want to have to run all over the store to find it.

Regarding the help wanted, the No. 1 desire among customers is to have knowledgeable staff. So if a person needs help with something you are not familiar with, don't try to bluff your way through. Get someone who can answer the customer's questions. You never know the depth of the customer's knowledge.

Customers want to be treated with promptness, respect and fairly. They also desire your time once they've made a decision to buy. Don't try to handle two or three people at one time.

Surprisingly, retailers only rate knowledge and promptness as fifth and sixth. Friendliness is their idea of what is most important to customers.

Customer interactions skills grow with practice and as you reflect on the interactions you have. You also can ask customers, as you get to know them, about how you and your staff might improve. If possible, ask them to think back to those first times they came in to your business.

In-person interaction with the customer forms an important part of his or her rating. Make every effort to bring your business to the top of the list.

For more help, visit our website, <https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/smallbusiness>, and sign up for the monthly newsletter.

More information is available at your local Extension office, as well as at <http://powerofbusiness.net> and <http://www.eXtension.org/entrepreneurship>.

The Small Business Administration and its related organizations, such as the Small Business Development Centers and Service Corps of Retired Executives, along with many other state agencies, also can be valuable resources.

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