

Small-business Savvy: Connecting With Your Customer

By Glenn Muske, Rural and Agribusiness Enterprise Development Specialist
NDSU Extension Service

Your customers are your business. Connecting with them means success or failure.

How well does your business do in terms of connecting? You won't find many answers in this column, but you will find lots of questions you need to think about.

How do you connect with your customers?

I suspect many of you have a phone at your business. Do you publish the number? I know businesses that don't.

And when you or one of your employees answers the phone, what do you say? What is your tone of voice? Do you ask what the person is calling about?

How long does the phone ring before someone answers? And how quickly are transfers made? What about phone messages? How quickly are they returned? Think in terms of hours, not days.

Then you have the people who walk into your store. Are they greeted, and if so, how? How long are they in the store before the greeting occurs? And how many employees might they pass before someone asks if they need some help?

How about when people leave: Are they thanked for stopping? Do you encourage them to come back again or ask if they found what they wanted? Do you go as far as suggesting where they might find what they are looking for? (I am reminded of that each Christmas season when watching "Miracle on 34th Street.")

Today you also have to think about how you are connecting online with your customer.

I won't even ask if you have a website but instead ask how easily people can find your business contact information on your website. Make it visible and on every page. What about a comment/question box right on the website?

Besides the standard information on your website, offer email addresses, driving directions and maps.

Remember that your online audience probably isn't who you think it is. You may assume it is the "younger" generation. It is, and that group rapidly is becoming the largest spending segment. But every age group is doing online activities, with those 60 and older the fastest growing segment.

In terms of email, how quickly do you respond? You should be responding in no more than four hours.

Finally, don't forget the online social media channels. You have two issues here. In the first scenario, your business doesn't have any social media channels. While I might encourage a business to have a channel, you certainly have reasons - time being a big one - for not having such an online presence.

Even if you don't have a channel, that doesn't mean your business isn't being mentioned in social media. So you want to be there to answer questions, thank those who offer positive remarks and respond to negative criticism.

And while you are reviewing what is being said about your business on social media, don't forget to monitor online review sites for comments as well.

If you do maintain one or more social media channels, the preferred response time is an hour or less in most cases.

Connecting with your customers is crucial. To do it well, remember all the options, practice and train on the methods, and ask your customers how you are doing.

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 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.

###

NDSU Agriculture Communication

Source: Glenn Muske, (701) 328-9718, glenn.muske@ndsu.edu

Editor: Ellen Crawford, (701) 231-5391, ellen.crawford@ndsu.edu