

Small-business Savvy: Promises and Reputation

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Have you ever had a customer waiting for something? How did you respond? Did you provide an answer based on your work schedule, or did you respond quickly, without any thought of whether you could deliver as promised?

Making promises is easy. Keeping those commitments is much harder.

Your response puts you on a slippery slope. You want to appear responsive to customers' needs, yet over-committing to something you can't provide only will damage your reputation. Do you think about your work schedule in realistic terms before responding with a commitment? And are you serious in your answer, or are you just wanting to pacify the customer?

Did you say what you meant? When you say a couple of hours, do you mean two hours or sometime maybe that morning or afternoon, or even that day? Did you even think you were making a commitment, or were you really just saying you were working on the problem?

Communication is tricky. You know what you are thinking, but do your words reflect those thoughts accurately?

On the other side, you have the customer. How does he or she interpret your comment?

Each customer may interpret the comment differently. Some will have that firm two-hour block in mind while others understand you are working on the problem with no firm time commitment in mind.

Through time, these things become less of an issue as you get to know your customers. They learn your common phrases and meanings and you know theirs.

Yet you are operating in the dark with the new customer. The early elements of your reputation are being formed with the new customer.

So what can you do? Obviously, part of the answer is to get to know your customers. But if the customer is new, you may not have a second chance to make a favorable impression.

That's why you need to be honest in your assessments. Don't use vague answers. Give a clear, specific answer and check back with the customer to ensure they understand your message. Be very aware of what you are telling the customer and how it might be interpreted.

Finally, be clear in your answer and base it on what you know you can deliver. Consult your work schedule to see what's possible. In other words, don't say that something will be ready for pickup at 5 p.m. today if you won't have it ready at that time

Your business reputation is built not only on the work you do but on how well you meet the commitments you make. Clear communication can go a long way to build your reputation. Make it your standard.

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.

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NDSU Agriculture Communication

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