

## **Small-business Savvy: Your First Customer**

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The day is nearly here for you to open the doors of your new business. What a great feeling!

Have you thought about who might be your first customer? Might I suggest that the first person should be your worst critic, or might I even say nightmare?

That comment probably dampened your enthusiasm. Why start with such a person?

The answer is simple. You want someone who will hold your business up to the highest standards, and will critique your business from your front door through all of the processes, right down to how clean the bathrooms are and the condition of the sidewalks in front of your store.

Some might suggest that the first customer be you. My feeling is that you are too invested in the business and might not see or you might overlook some of the issues. Your first customer needs to be someone who:

- \* Can tell you exactly what he or she saw and what he or she experienced
- \* You can yell at when he or she is honest with you and who then will tell you even more
- \* Will take the time to methodically test your staff and procedures, from the initial greeting through sales, any delivery or service you offer, customer complaints and returns.

Sometimes a business does what is considered a soft opening. That's an opening with no publicity, just word of mouth. The idea means that you and your staff are not overwhelmed with customers. And that is a good idea, but I probably wouldn't recommend it until you already have given everything a rigorous testing.

Another approach often used is to invite family and friends to a preopening. This is another good idea, especially because they represent your cheering section (you will need one) and often are investors. Yet they often want to say good things and find that "laying it on the line" is hard to do. A preopening is a good public relations move, but it doesn't help you work out the bugs.

Your goal at this point is to be as ready as you can be for the first day of business. That first day might be the soft opening or the friends-and-family event or something else. No matter what day one is, you want everything to be operating as best it can.

One person sometimes suggested as your reviewer is someone in the same business as you. However, you may not want someone from your own community, although that person would bring a richness of community knowledge that would be useful. You may want to bring in someone who runs a business in a community like yours but in a town some distance away.

When I asked the question about who your first customer might be, you probably thought about the first real customer.

That first customer will come. You want to make sure that he or she will come back.

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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