

First Impressions Make a Lasting Impression

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Your mother always told you it was important to make a good first impression, whether it was the first day of school with a new teacher or when you started your first job. It turns out, that may have been the best advice your mother ever gave you, although all mom's advice is good. When it comes to converting prospects into customers, a great first impression can be the deciding factor. It sounds so simplistic that small business owners may take it for granted that they are indeed putting their best foot forward when they encounter a prospective customer. But are you?

In today's tightening market where many businesses are facing declining sales, the first human contact with a customer may be your only chance to convince them that you are the company with whom they want to do business. That means that the way your company greets them and responds to them in that first contact is crucial. Whether it's through your website or by phone, the prospect should feel welcomed which means the greeting is timely, professional and of course friendly.

THE INITIAL CONTACT – MAKING IT EASY FOR THE PROSPECT

Website Inquiries

- Make it easy for customers to contact you via email, if that is their preference, by having an email address clearly identified on your website.
- To make it even easier, set up a quick form on your site that customers can fill in – it can capture all the initial information you need to figure out what this customer wants, which makes it that much easier to please them with your response.
- Create a standard reply that captures all the general data you would want to convey about your company. This might include how long you've been in business, some general details about the products and services you offer, your selling point (whether it is lower pricing than the competition, better customer service, higher quality of goods or services, etc). Then when you get an email inquiry from a customer, tweak your standard response based on the customer's email and reply as soon as possible.

Phone Inquiries

- If it's possible, a live person answering the phone is far more welcoming than voicemail. Make sure you've trained your front-line employee(s) on how you want phone calls answered and given them some general information about your products and services. And always make sure they have the ability to reach you or the appropriate person in order to follow up with the customer quickly.

- If you need to use voicemail to pick up incoming calls, make sure your greeting clearly identifies your company, asks the caller to leave a detailed message and indicates when the caller can expect a return phone call.

IMPRESSING THE PROSPECT WITH YOUR RESPONSE

Quick Turnaround

The most important thing about your response to prospect email or phone inquiries is that it is timely. After a few hours, people get impatient. After more than eight they are getting ticked off and by the following day, you've potentially lost them before you have even spoken to them. If they haven't already gone with another company, it will be an uphill battle to secure their trust again. Make every effort to respond as quickly as possible.

Many prospects want to get straight to the facts, i.e. they want to know how much your product or service costs and how quickly you can provide it. If you need to gather information from the prospect before you can write a quote, make a list of all the questions you need answered before you call them. That way, you'll be sure to have everything you need and you won't have to call them back which can be at best annoying to the prospect and at worse, time for a competitor to deliver their quote.

Professionalism

Presenting a professional image from the start shows that your company will make a good partner and nothing shows professionalism like a well written, thorough and attractive quote. That doesn't mean it has to be fancy. Using any word-processing software and plain paper jazzed up with your company's name and logo, you can create an inexpensive yet impressive quote. Microsoft Word even has template service quotes as do many internet sites. Just make sure you pay attention to the details:

- Include your company's name, your name, contact information and the date the quote is offered and the date it expires
- Clarify all the key points of the quote: price, timeline, payment terms, exactly what service or product is being provided, etc.
- Double check that you've used the correct name of the prospect throughout the quote
- Do a spell and grammar check
- Make sure there is a place for both you and the prospect to sign

The added benefit of a written quote over a verbal quote is that you have something to refer to if a problem arises protecting both you and your potential customer.

Friendly

Last but not least, make every customer feel like they are your #1 customer. This doesn't mean exaggerating what your company can do for them, it just

means making them feel welcomed and that you are going to listen to and fulfill their needs better than anyone else can.

The beauty of making a great first impression is that it costs very little or no money on your part. It does require time on your part or a staff member's but that will be worth it when you've landed the client and are on your way to building a long term relationship with them. Not to mention the great word of mouth press you will get when that new client refers friends, family or colleagues your way.

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