

9 Ways to Build Lasting Relationships

This article appeared in the Occupational Health Research Tracker Newsletter, 2nd Quarter 1999

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“If you build it, they will come.” Remember the whispered message that spurred Kevin Costner’s character in “Field of Dreams” to carve out a baseball diamond smack in the middle of acres of corn? Sure enough, they came.

Now apply the same message to today’s health care marketplace. You can build an occupational health center, and people may come. But until you also build a lasting relationship with your customers, they may not have a reason to come back. And that’s what customer retention is all about.

To get your organization on track, follow these guidelines:

1. Make a plan with accountability and focus.

Ask yourself five key questions about your current customers (see sidebar). Decide exactly who you want to be and who you want your customers to be. When you have a plan, put it on paper, share it with everyone in the company and hold every employee accountable for customer satisfaction.

A couple years ago, Frederick Occupational Health Services in Frederick, MD, set out to establish longer-term relationships with its customers – acting as a partner, rather than a supplier. Doing so meant first taking a closer look at its customers and prospective customers and projecting injury trends based on SIC code data, says Frank Venuto, vice president of human resources. “We started to get a better sense of what our volume of business could be and what our sales activities could look like.” From that point, Venuto and others developed quarterly marketing plans and tied in quarterly performance standards for the sales staff – important productivity measures for the new plan. On the operations side, the company made sure that it was internally organized to support a boost in business, particularly in on-site service to its employers. Today, with the new plan firmly in place, Venuto says both the sales and operations areas are clear about performance expectations. What’s more, Frederick has seen a 50% increase in volume in the clinic.

2. Create a strategy to keep customers coming back.

It takes lots of time and effort to get new customers – but you need to spend even more time and effort in keeping them. Consider what one organization does to keep customers coming back.

When Work Fitness, an occupational health center in the Quad Cities, merged with area hospital systems, the growing company found it simply couldn't be as responsive to its employer clients as it once was. So Work Fitness president Patrick Doherty hired a full-time customer service representative dedicated to providing the kind of service customers had come to expect. Employees attend a mandatory business meeting one Wednesday a month where part of every session is dedicated to customer service, Doherty says. Today, business is booming thanks to a detailed customer retention strategy that also includes frequent breakfasts with its employer clients, corporate newsletters, face-to-face meetings and an employers'-site flu shot campaign.

3. Look at shining examples outside the industry.

Patients measure you against all of their other service experiences – including those of companies such as Federal Express, L.L. Bean, Disney and Nordstrom. Value and quality are both perceived and defined by the customer. So you need to define excellent service in terms that are relevant to the customer. Then you need to exceed their expectations. Take a look at how successful companies are setting standards to exceed any customer's needs.

4. Understand how your customers buy.

Today, our customers are far more sophisticated about health care than ever before. They read more and understand more about the subject, which also affects they way they buy our services. Interestingly enough, price is really irrelevant to people's health care "purchases." Customers are buying the experience, the education, the service and the value they perceive they're getting through a relationship with a health care provider. And whoever pays attention to those reasons will end up getting and, more importantly, keeping the customer's business.

The 5 W'S of Customer Retention

Just like the five questions every good journalist asks, there are five important questions for building customer relationships:

1. Who is our current customer?
2. What do we want them to buy from us?
3. When do we want them to buy from us?
4. What are we going to do for them?
5. How do we want them to buy from us?

5. Market your services to meet your customers' needs.

Marketing today is more than ever about responding to your customer's individual needs. By tracking their activity in your facility – when they've visited and why they came – you'll be well equipped to promote your services to them in the future. Whether you choose to reach them on a small scale (a personal phone call) or on a bigger level (direct marketing), you'll be prepared to reach someone who is a prime candidate for what you have to offer.

6. Become externally focused.

Walt Disney was a visionary and a phenomenal listener. He developed ideas that fit a need, want or desire that he heard a customer tell him about. In a nutshell, that's the key to keeping your customers satisfied. By taking the pulse of your marketplace and finding the right way to respond, you'll easily outperform the rest of the competition.

7. Teach your organization how to serve the customer.

Everyone in your organization is ultimately responsible for the customer's service experience – so your company needs to operate like a team. And to foster a team spirit, you need to show your employees how to put the customer first in a way that's meaningful to them. Build ways to continually recognize and reward proactive customer service behaviors in ways that create ownership for employees. Share your customer relationship strategy with them. They'll feel like part of the team, they'll take pride in their work and it will open up lines of communication both internally and externally.

8. Differentiate who you are, what your business is, and how you do business.

Before you're ready to say "Hey, look at us!" you've got to identify what makes you great. And you can't tell the public that you do everything well. Too many health care providers are giving the same broad message and ending up all looking the same to the public. The key is to capture the difference that positions a benefit to consumers and make it personal for them.

The plan that Frederick Occupational Health Services developed to build customer retention also has defined its position in the marketplace. Rather than merely selling a service, the organization positions itself as a partner that can satisfy, and project, customer needs. "Ultimately, what we're about is improving employers' productivity and controlling their losses," says Frederick's Frank Venuto. For example, by focusing on two or three critical aspects of an employer's risk assessment – such as a diabetic risk or an ergonomic concern – the organization can help develop personalized solutions for the employer. And because Frederick's occupational health division has access to an array of system-wide health care resources, sales reps can efficiently integrate these solutions to help employers control their losses. The partnership concept truly is paying off, Venuto says, with customer retention satisfaction levels at 90% and above.

9. Finally, walk the talk – and be passionate about it.

Now you're on your way to building a lasting relationship with your customers. But remember, it will be a constantly changing relationship and one you'll have to monitor continually. Keep listening to your customers. Stay in touch with what your peers are doing – inside and outside the industry. Ask your customers for feedback. Take it to heart. Act on it. Sure, anyone can “talk the talk” about customer retention. But when you truly value a customer relationship, your customers will pick up on your ability to fulfill the promise and your enthusiasm. Best of all, they'll tell other people, too.



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