

# At your service

Five tips for retaining customers **Interviewed by Clare DeCapua**

**R**etaining customers in the current economy means becoming a learning organization that is constantly evolving to the highest standards of service.

Through years of trial and error, Mary Rodino, Chief Marketing Officer of CIMCO Communications, has learned that retaining a customer base involves five key strategies: defining your customer experience, unifying your customer process, standardizing your customer process, creating a perceived value, and developing an effective customer loyalty strategy.

"A lot of companies are fighting to stand out," Rodino says. "If you keep doing the same things, you're guaranteed to be left behind."

*Smart Business* spoke with Rodino about how companies can look for constant improvement within their customer service practices to differentiate their products and services.



**Mary Rodino**  
Chief Marketing Officer,  
CIMCO Communications

## How does a company define its customer experience?

The customer experience is defined by every single touch point in the organization. From the first sales call to a signed contract, every touch point in that path should convey your customer experience. If a company is trying to provide a very high-touch experience to the customer, he or she needs to be treated that way all along, whether it's a service being delivered in a professional manner or a product being delivered on time. Every process that touches the customer must be identified so it can be replicated.

The biggest challenge for every company is consistency, and this is where effective training and consistent values across the organization are imperative. If everyone knows that his job is to treat the customer with a sense of urgency, as if the customer were paying his salary, it creates an incentive to provide the highest level of service.

## What aspects of the customer process should be evaluated?

The customer process should be evaluated at every interaction point with the customer. Do customers really want a live experience because the particular product or service that they have ordered from you is complex and they need a live resolution? Or is it something they could take care of via a Web portal or through an online trouble-

reporting system? You can use the findings from your customer interaction evaluation to ensure that the customer experience is consistent for each specific segment. That evaluation process has to be communicated and replicated throughout the organization.

The other challenge is to communicate with customers cost-effectively. You may want to give customers a live support person, but perhaps they're spending a very low amount, or it's a low-cost product, and you can't afford to have a live person help them. Segmentation can help you identify areas that may need different customer communication processes.

## How can companies ensure that employees are doing their part for the customer?

In my experience, you must hold every single employee and department accountable for the customer experience. No matter the role they play within the company, employees must understand how their job impacts customers or other departments that directly deal with customers. For example, if the shipping department shipped something out late and the company wasn't able to bill it in this month's cycle, it has impacted revenue.

Chain reactions such as this eventually affect everyone and make it difficult for departments to reach desired performance

levels. A good starting place is to share customer feedback with key departments. There's nothing more poignant than reading live data from a customer.

The next component of accountability is compensating employees in a way that is directly correlated with customer churn. So you're compensating them appropriately when customers leave or when new revenue is signed and driving the right behavior through the whole operation and shipping/delivery cycle.

## How can companies impact their customers' perceived value?

Customers want to feel that they're getting more for their money. It can be as simple as an account executive taking the time to walk a customer through his or her bill or adding on an additional feature to the product for a reduced cost.

For example, a company like ours needs to make sure that the company using our solutions understands not just what the solution is but also the applications and features of the solution. Offering training or extra support materials can be a great added value that a competitor may not offer.

## What strategies can companies use to create customer loyalty?

A company must define itself in order to be differentiated by the type of loyalty programs it offers. For example, a law firm needs to offer strong relationship loyalty and provide its high-level customers with a high-touch experience, whether it's being available to them more often or providing consulting services. Other companies might offer what's called program loyalty. A good example of program loyalty would be a frequent buyer program, where the more business you do with someone, the more discounts you get. Offering customers incentives or discounts for providing a lead or referral also builds strong loyalty.

It's also extremely important to have a consistent program where you can measure customer satisfaction. Whether that is through events or through regular surveying, feedback from customers gives you the information you need to begin building both proactive as well as reactive loyalty efforts. <<

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