

Being Optimistic Even in This Economy



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Some years ago, I needed to rent a piece of equipment. It was a fan or a pump, something like that. I was new to the area, so I asked my neighbor where I could rent equipment. He told me there was an equipment rental place a mile from my house that would be sure to have what I needed. He added, "But you won't like them."

That was an odd comment, so I asked him what he meant. "They don't like their customers, and they don't like their own business. They are rude, and expensive, and when you are done working with them, you'll feel pretty bad about having given them your money."

I checked them out, and he was right. They charged a lot, and the equipment looked as if it had been used during World War II and dragged behind a truck for several miles. When I rented it, they told me, "It looks like a piece of crap, but if it breaks, you own it." (Actually, that isn't exactly what he said, but you get the idea.) He quoted a price that seemed to be about twice what it would have cost new.

I used the equipment, and it didn't break. They were just about as rude when I dropped it off the next day. And then I forgot about them.

Last month – more than 10 years

since my first visit – I was reminded of this story when I needed to rent another piece of equipment. This time it was one of my employees who referred me to the same outfit. "But you won't like them," he said and then recounted the same reservations as my neighbor, almost word for word. That company's reputation was obviously well known, and it hadn't changed in the intervening 10 years. This time, I chose to rent someplace else. It was a little out of my way, but I was glad I didn't go back to that other place.

So why should you be optimistic about business opportunities, even in our current economic environment? This equipment rental company has been in the rental business for 20 years. And if businesses that treat their customers this poorly can survive, there is plenty of room for businesses that will treat their customers with respect, courtesy and competence.

It isn't just the overt rudeness at other businesses that should give you optimism. Opportunities for your business are demonstrated daily by your competitors:

- Remember that time you dashed across the parking lot, just at 9:00 p.m., only to have the lady at the corner market lock the door in your face? She needed to go home, but she would have earned your undying loyalty by waiting

long enough to sell you a bottle of cough syrup.

- Some time ago, I ran into an old employee, who had left our business to pursue another line of work. He was now selling insurance for one of the major national companies. He offered to give me a quote on my car insurance. I have two old collectible cars, so I gave him my phone number. He never called. A year later, I ran into him again. He apparently didn't remember our earlier conversation. He told me that he was selling insurance and offered to give me a quote. I thought, "Sure, why not?" and I gave him my phone number. You guessed it. I never heard from him. Your competitor's apathy creates opportunity for you.

- For three years in a row, I have had to call our landscape company to ask them to repair a broken sprinkler head. Once a week, a crew shows up to push a mower back and forth over dead grass, but they have never felt the need to repair it or to bring it to my attention. What creates the opportunity? Lack of attentiveness.

Is that your business? Do your employees walk around with sour faces? Are they paying attention to your company's relationship with your customers? Or are they really telling your customers, by what they say and do, that they don't want their business? You don't have room for any employees like that. Move those employees along to one of your competitors to make room for someone who has the right attitude. The payoff for your business will be huge.

I firmly believe that to be in the

top 10 percent of your industry, you need only follow a few simple rules:

1. Act like you appreciate your customers, and then say, "I appreciate your business, thanks for coming in."
2. Learn to communicate with your vendors, customers and employees. If your receptionist can't get your messages to you, hire someone who can. If you haven't figured out how to daily respond to your e-mails, faxes and text messages, learn. There is no excuse for not staying in touch.
3. You don't always have to finish the job on time, but if you are going to be late, give your customers a call... in advance.
4. Answer your customers' questions. If you don't know the answer, say so. There is nothing more frustrating than not getting a straight answer.
5. Do what you say you are going to do. Return the call. Mail the check. Research the answer. The single biggest reason customers say they are unhappy with businesses is because businesses don't do what they say they will do. If you can't remember what you say you are going to do for your customers, write it down. And teach your employees to do the same thing.

Why should you be optimistic, even in this economy? Because if your competition resembles any of the businesses I've described here, they either won't read this, or they will but won't follow through. Turn their shortcomings into your opportunities. **ADM**