

Standing Above The Crowd

In today's highly competitive business environment it is critical to find ways to separate yourself from the other companies who sell the same – or similar – product and/or service. Here are several strategies that can help you accomplish this:

Help your clients achieve their goals. Virtually every business person has specific goals they are striving to achieve. These can include everything from increasing their market share and sales, to reducing operating expenses, to streamlining the business, to incorporating new business practices. Invest time learning the key objectives of each of your customers. Then determine how your products and services can help them achieve their targets. In some cases, you may not be able to help them but recommending someone who can assist them will be recognized and remembered. The more you can help them achieve their goals the more valued you will become.

Under-promise, over-deliver. As old as this expression is, it is still one of the best ways to stand out from the crowd. Far too many people make commitments to their customers and fail to follow through as promised. It's easy to fall into this trap, particularly for service-oriented individuals. We have every intention of delivering on a promise but often, unexpected circumstances crop up that prevent us from doing so. While this is acceptable by most people – once in a while – frequent occurrences will drive your customers to your competition.

Be innovative. Most companies do business the same way until a crisis, emergency, or significant change in the marketplace forces them to adapt. The most successful organizations are creative and innovative. They constantly look for new ways to do business, gain more their market share, please their customers, and offer new products and services. The inherent challenge with this is that you will encounter resistance from many people both inside and outside of the company; I have experienced this first-hand in several companies I have worked for.

However, if you try to be innovative ONLY when it's absolutely necessary, you will never get the head-start on your competition. Watch for trends in other industries as well as yours and think of how you can incorporate these into your business. Be a leader instead of a follower.

Surprise them. Look for ways to surprise your customers and do something completely unexpected for them. Make a charitable donation in their name. Invite them to a special event. Give them a bonus gift or service. Find out what networking events your clients might like to attend and send them a complimentary invitation. If they enjoy reading send an occasional book in their area of interest. Gift certificates to a show or play may be appreciated by some of your customers.

Two words of caution: i) Be careful that your "surprise" is not misinterpreted as a bribe to do business with you. There cannot be any strings or hidden conditions attached to this offering. ii) Make sure your client is allowed to accept a gift. Some organizations have a strict "no gift" policy and you must respect it.

Keep in touch. Very few people keep in touch on a regular basis with their customers. Yet, this is the best way to keep your name in their mind. An effective strategy – without appearing like a pest – is to send them useful information on a regular basis. You can send a newspaper clipping or a magazine article. You can also send them helpful and practical tips to improve their business; this can be set up quite easily electronically.

Send cards on special occasions but instead of the standard Christmas cards send some on lesser promoted days such as St. Patrick's Day and Halloween, etc. You can also send postcards from exotic locations – just be careful not to write a tacky message. This past winter I traveled to St. Maarten in the Caribbean and found a beautiful postcard of a beach along the Caribbean Ocean. I sent this card to about four dozen clients and prospects with the message, *"When the winter starts getting you down, take a three minute vacation by picturing yourself on this beach."*

Have a VIP day. You can organize a golf tournament – assuming of course your customers play the game. If you're a retailer, you can invite your best customer to an invitation-only special sale.

Every year, a friend of mine organizes an evening filled with networking opportunities, guest speakers, great food and beverages and invites his clients, prospects, and friends to attend. Another friend of mine

takes several of his clients on excursions to a local winery. He ensures they get a tour, a private tasting of premium wines, and a five-star dinner.

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