



Brian Finlayson

Winning ways

Not long ago, I was the mystery judge of nine retail finalists entered into the Feilding Excellence in Business Awards 2011 and was on the lookout for excellent customer service. Congratulations to Manawatu Grain Seed and Saddlery, winners of both the Supreme Award and Best Rural Business.

All delivered, but the winner had the 'x' factor – a young shop assistant who clearly had a genuine interest in the products sold and the customers she served. She welcomed me, listened carefully to my request (about dog food) and took time to explain her recommendations, taking on board what I had said.

It was a pleasure to see this business scoop the main award at the excellent presentation evening organised by Feilding Promotions' Helen Worboys. The event attracted 250 nominees and had business, building, employee and employer categories. All in all it was an uplifting, heartening experience highlighting that excellence and outstanding service is being practised and rewarded.

So, there's my acknowledgement of those who have gone the extra mile, but when did you bring out a bouquet to acknowledge the people in your business who've gone beyond the call of duty or consistently punched above their weight? I talk with owners and managers every week who often mention people who are crucial to making their business tick and I often wonder if those mentioned are ever told. Sure, you're probably paying them well and being a good

employer, but don't forget to occasionally acknowledge your team or individuals. It needn't cost you a lot; it might be a night out, an impromptu morning tea shout, or a simple thank you. We all thrive on praise, so dish it out.

I hear what you say ... sometimes.

As I mentioned, what made the five-star service at Manawatu Grain Seed and Saddlery was the ability of the staff member to really listen to what I was asking for and respond appropriately. Unfortunately, I frequently witness examples of retailers clearly not listening to what's being asked – and the customer who asks about a no-frills mobile phone who receives a full-on spiel about the benefits of a Blackberry!

Yes, I know we should talk-up and make add-on sales where possible, but be realistic. Take account of the skill level, budget and aspirations of your customer and match them with what best suits their needs, not yours.

Faulty goods

Listening and accepting also goes a long way in dealing with the return of faulty goods. Don't turn the situation around and lay the blame on the customer, or tell them it's nothing to do with you and that they need to contact the

manufacturer or distributor. Faulty goods are your problem because, under consumer law, the buck stops with you.

update budgets and generally get the right information to tell you what is and isn't working for you.

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Save yourself time and unnecessary stress and ask the customer what they would like you to do. If it's replacement of product or a money refund, just do it because long-term the cost will be negligible to you.

The bottom line

I'm noticing that in some cases gross profits are slipping and I believe it's due to two factors: theft and overbuying of stock. Are you minimising the chances of theft with careful placement of fittings and lighting to avoid 'dead spots'? If unsure about your vulnerability, sign up for a mystery shop to find out.

The over-buying of stock is a clear sign that retailers are not making the time to analyse the detail of sales. I've said it before: make time to work on your business; if possible, remove yourself from the shop floor to look through sales,

Finally, following on from last month I have another example of a retailer who is probably losing out because of making incorrect assumptions about his potential customer base. He's a specialist retailer, but nowhere on his shop front does he promote this point of difference which would surely be a draw card to many people. When I raised this oversight, the owner felt it was unnecessary because he'd been trading in the area for so long that everyone would know what services he offered.

Oh dear, just goes to show what's obvious to some is clearly not to others! ■

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