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Are you being served?

Daniele Lima discusses the untapped moneymaker that is customer service.

The nation's largest childcare centre ABC Learning is officially in receivership with over a billion dollars in unpaid debt. The world's largest car maker Toyota has announced a disappointing profit result that is down two-thirds from last year's level. Yes, even the corporate giants are feeling the economic pinch. Perhaps one of the best strategies to survive in these troubling times could be as simple as offering an extraordinary level of customer service.

Recently the Australian economic projection for growth has been revised down to two percent by the Treasury (and 1.8 percent by the International Monetary Fund). The spin doctors are working overtime to tell anyone willing to listen that this figure remains one of the strongest projections for any of the developed nations.

From my perspective it's hard to see it this way, because from my earliest days at university I've had it drummed into me by my economics professors that a healthy economy needs to be growing at least five percent per year or it is at real risk of not being able to support its population's evolving needs.

Suffice to say, consumers have a very good reason to be cautious, to cut their non-essential spending, save their money and, in short, wait and see how it all continues to unfold. For many businesses this could be the forerunner to eventual failure.

Businesses everywhere will now be looking for every competitive edge available to them. There is no doubt that one available to all businesses remains differentiating themselves on the basis of unparalleled levels of customer

service – service that carries tangible benefits and a level of emotional engagement that helps to convert uncommitted customers to staunch advocates. In recent days, against all logic and against this backdrop, I have personally witnessed several unbelievably poor examples of customer service.

In one case a lady was letting the sales clerk at an optometrist know that the lenses in her new glasses were making her feel dizzy and needed to be adjusted. A reasonable request, I would have thought. The clerk on the other hand obviously did not agree. She rolled her eyes and moaned, "Surely you can put up with that?"

The next day I was in a supermarket and watched in disbelief as a customer waited patiently to be served at a deli counter as two servers talked to each other happily ignoring him. After a minute or two, he politely asked one of the two if he could be served. One eventually asked for his order while the other, annoyed that he had the audacity to interrupt such a witty dialogue, (yes, you guessed it) rolled her eyes as she sighed her disapproval.

The tragedy of this is that these types of anecdotes are becoming so common today that many reading this would be thinking, 'Yeah it happens all the time'. No doubting this truth, but what it really is, is a great opportunity for your business to stand out from the crowd and differentiate itself by offering customer service that is remarkable. Remarkably good, that is.

So what does this customer service look like and where does it start? Clearly for any high level of customer service to exist it needs to reside firstly in the culture of the firm. Custom-

ers are the lifeblood of the business and must be respected each and every time.

What does your business do to make its customers feel extraordinary? Quickly list three things. If you can't, be scared. Be very, very scared. But you do have the opportunity to make yourself indispensable if you come up with some innovative customer service strategy to make your customers' experience unforgettable.

Simply put, your aim is create a set of customer service protocols, as part of your total product offering, that is so noteworthy that your target market will actively seek you out.

Smart marketers will work to create value-added dimensions of customer service all designed to increase customer satisfaction and, ultimately, customer loyalty. Here are a few aspects you may want to consider adapting for your business...

PERSONALISING YOUR PRODUCT OR SERVICE

Sport shoe retailer Active Feet has special treadmills and video cameras set up to be able to analyse the gait of every person buying shoes to ensure that they are being sold a shoe that is perfectly suited to their specific needs. The process is overseen by a podiatrist with additional insight into foot related problems and solutions. In short, meaningful differentiation.

MAKING YOUR DELIVERY OF SERVICE QUICKER

Aussie Home Loans added real value when it offered its customers a one-hour turnaround time on home loan approval time. This had traditionally taken several days.