

Are You Listening to Your Customers?

What kind of a question is that? Of course we listen to our customers. When they call you, do they get to hear your automated message... press 1 for ___, press 2 for ___? They press 2, then hear press 1 for ___ press 2 for ___ and so on until they get aggravated enough to hang up.

Have any of your customers ever told you how hard it is to call your company's main phone line and try and get connected to a specific department without getting the run around? But then they would actually have to reach a live person to let you know. The artificial intelligence (AI) barrier is cheap and mainly effective at blocking communications.

You are now at a crossroad; do you keep your aggravating AI in place or do you have a live person answer the phone? I'm not talking about letting customers call your personal cellphone.

If you don't have a way for your customers to be heard, you cannot make necessary improvements. You might not even know that something you thought was a common practice for your business was not working. If you own a garden center, have you ever heard customers ask why are all the carts out in the parking lot? Easy fix to a significant problem. If they cannot find a cart, they cannot buy your products. Customers are a great way to find out what works and what does not.

ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR CUSTOMERS' CONCERNS

Every business owner, manager, employee (no matter what industry you're in) should be listening to their customers. Complaints and suggestions should be discussed promptly and taken seriously. If you get a repeated question or series of similar questions from several customers regarding something not so good, you need to act ASAP.

Doing nothing will definitely tell your customers their concerns are not important to you and therefore they are not important either. I've been at companies

in the past that have had complaints and elected not to do anything, simply saying that whatever the issue was would cost money to fix. In fact, we hear this all the time with respect to advice we are paid to deliver to our customers. Understandably, some things can be fixed quickly while others might take some time. A response that a customer has been heard is often enough to let them know they matter.

POSITIVE FEEDBACK DESERVES ATTENTION TOO

Not all customer comments are negative. If you hear something good such as a compliment, you need to discuss that also and act

on it. Obviously if you're doing something good you need to know what it is and keep it going or capitalize on it.

Customers prove to be a great source of new ideas, products and services that could change your business and keep it vital and growing. They are an amazing resource since they do shop and are comparing products and services across all of your competitors. It would be a great way to stand out from the rest, if you choose to listen to them carefully.

By the way, have you stopped listening to your employees too? If your company has the concept of associates or team members being all the same, then ask them to listen to your customers as well. By doing so, your employees can bring a lot of valuable information to the table at your next company meeting. They also have ideas all their own that should be discussed.

TIPS FOR LISTENING AND RESPONDING

Roughly 88 percent of U.S. consumers read reviews posted online — on sites like Yelp, TripAdvisor, Google and Facebook — to determine whether a local business is good or not. In our industry, they may not have the same resource with the possible exception of garden centers.

1. Claim your business listings and pages: Identify the review sites that are most relevant to your business and plant your flags in these places by claiming your business listings and pages. Then you'll have the ability to take control and post responses to your reviews.
2. Say thank you: It doesn't matter whether the review is positive or negative. By expressing your gratitude, you can show the reviewer — as well as potential and existing customers — that your business values candid feedback.
3. Avoid knee-jerk reactions: Online criticism can hurt and it's easy to lose tempers. Don't let emotions get in the way of writing a polite, professional and patient response.
4. Respond consistently: Businesses that respond to reviews enjoy an estimated 17 percent higher level of engagement. This shows that the more engaged you are, the more interested your customers become.
5. Avoid generic responses: Using generic templates to craft your review response won't do your business reputation any good. Be thoughtful, personal and humanized.
6. Say you are sorry: Be honest, if your business is indeed wrong, apologize. Doing so is often the first step to changing the conversation with your customers.
7. Solve the problem: The most effective responses to online reviews are the ones that specifically address the cause of the reviewer's dissatisfaction. Commit to providing a better experience next time. Use something like, "We're investigating what went wrong," or "We're working on it." Doing so will tell your customers ... give us another chance! [gpn](#)



Chase Agricultural Consulting, LLC was formed in 2011 by Ann (A.R.) Chase and Mike Zemke. Ann has more than 35 years experience in research, diagnostics and practical consulting in plant pathology. She has been retired from the University of Florida since 1994 but remains on staff as a Professor Emeritus. Mike holds an Associate of Applied Science in manufacturing drafting and started his education in horticulture when he and Ann were married in 1995. He specializes in communications of all sorts within the industry.