

Communicate to Make Customers Feel Like Part of a Club

Success this season hinges on how consumers behave. Suppliers and retailers alike are assessing consumer confidence and how that will translate to purchases of new bike equipment.

Most agree that consumers want more value for their dollar, and they're willing to look further to find good deals. That means retailers must give existing customers a reason to return without succumbing to broad discounts or price competition.

Your point-of-sale system is a powerful—and often underutilized—tool to capture valuable customer data. Use that information to communicate with your best customers and keep your brand front of mind.

Here are a few ways:

Direct Mail. Direct marketers are enjoying resurgence as businesses look for ways to stand out. Segment your list to target your most loyal shoppers. Include a coupon to reward them without

offering a blanket discount.

E-Newsletters. E-mail blasts remain a cost-effective way to reach customers in the digital space. Offer value by sharing new product information, promoting upcoming events and highlighting store news. Easy and inexpensive tools allow you to create a template and track open rates.

Social Media. Hot new applications like Twitter and Facebook let you engage with customers in an authentic

way. Create a deeper connection to your business by revealing the personalities behind it. If you don't know how to use these tools, recruit a teenager who works in your shop to create a presence for you.

By connecting with your customers in these ways, you can make them feel like they are part of an insider club. Making customers feel special will encourage their loyalty and entice them to spend at your store.

Guest Editorial

Don't Let Consumers Purchase Their Next Bicycle Elsewhere

BY DAN MANN

"They bought their last car from the wrong dealership. I'm just making sure they don't make the same mistake again."

I was talking with my friend Todd Ouellette last weekend. He owns numerous automobile dealerships (as well as motorsports and boats) across the southeast. In a time when auto retailers are failing in unprecedented numbers, his business continues to thrive. So when he talks business strategy, I listen.

He made the point that the policy for many auto/boat/motorcycle dealers is to not provide service for customers who've purchased their vehicle from a competitor. He says that attitude is actually prevalent in these industries.

His approach is different. He rolls out

the red carpet for these customers. He wants them to feel so welcome at his business that they want to come back. He thinks of ways he can go overboard to let these prospective customers know how happy he is to have them in his service department. He wants their next purchase to be at his store.

I thought of the cycling industry. Have you been guilty of rolling your eyes when a competitor's bike comes into your service department? Or worse, when a non-cyclist brings in a mass-merchant bicycle?

What is this consumer thinking? "I bought my bike at X store, but they don't service the bike, and I need some repairs. I'm reluctant to go to this bicycle store, but I have no choice." They may expect to be treated rudely. They

may feel out of place in such a technical environment. They may have no expectations.

But here is where we have a tremendous opportunity. Surprise this customer. Show interest in their riding. Don't judge their bike. Look for ways to solve their problem. (How would you behave if your favorite pro racer came to your store for service?) Your interaction may be just the experience that increases their interest in our sport. Mostly, you have the opportunity to demonstrate that they should have bought their bike from you—and help them to commit to not making that mistake again.

Do this:

1. Talk with your mechanics about this. Be sure you have their buy-in.
2. Develop your service writer process

to include a solid approach for working with this type of customer.

3. Get them the "Ready to Pedal" or Riding FUNdamentals DVDs from Growth Cycle.

4. Include the "Bike Shop Advantage" brochure (free from the NBDA) with the claim check you give the customer.

During these challenging economic times, don't let a potential customer walk out the door because you don't recognize him. Adopt Todd's winning attitude: They may have bought their last bicycle from the wrong business, but today I will make sure that doesn't happen again!

Dan Mann is the founding partner of TMG, a consulting firm that specializes in sales training for the bike industry.