

CUSTOMER-FOCUS: The Power of First Impressions

By David H. McNair

First things first.

The first day of the new year. No better time to think of first impressions. Should you read no further in this column, read this: *In the first SEVEN SECONDS of a customer contact, ELEVEN JUDGEMENTS are made about you and your business!*

Just seven seconds. Now, think about your business for a moment. Where are the majority of first impressions made? Is it typically by phone? Is it walk-in traffic? Is it your signage or your parking lot? How about your landscaping, building entry, lobby, or company vehicles? Most likely, 80% of the first impressions of your business are made in a few select ways. Make a quick list of these contact points, and then...don't ignore them!

Phone Madness

Let's start with the impressions made over the phone. This may involve your phone system, the number of rings before answering, the automated routings, your receptionist's greeting and tone, voice mail messages, and even the music selection (or sales messages) while customers and prospects are holding.

Imagine that you've just been referred to a new insurance agency, law firm, or physician for that matter. It could be most any business. You call on the phone to schedule an appointment and you hear the typically garbled greeting followed by the ever annoying, "hold please." Now you're in the phone wastelands. Is there music or do you have dead air? What's the music? How long are you holding? The longer you wait, the more negative thoughts that begin to build. Have you tried calling your own place of work and judged it from the customer's perspective?

Turned off

Last week I called a business and was immediately thrown into the hold dungeon. Their "music on hold" was tuned to a local radio station. Lucky me, I got to hear two completely vulgar disc jockeys talking about...well, suffice to say you don't want to know.

So what's my first impression? I'm thinking...what kind of judgement can I expect this business to have when that's the selection of *music* I'm subjected to while on hold? How welcomed and or important to them did I feel with that rushed greeting? I'm beginning to make all sorts of associations or connections regarding their people and their professionalism – all from that relatively short time on hold. Were they deserving of my less than favorable assumptions? Maybe, maybe not. The point is, they were now in a position of having to rebuild my confidence in their abilities, and my desire to work with them.

Playing Catch up

This is the crux of the issue. When a first impression is anything less than the standard we set for our business, then we are playing catch up from that point forward. If we are truly committed to delighting our customers, then we should have a goal set for the service levels that we commit to deliver. (This goal, by the way, should be set above the customer's standard expectations or you're doing little to invite them back.)

If you accept this, then when a customer first makes contact with your business, he should be immediately impressed, i.e., you've exceeded his expectations and you have him at or above your service goal. Should you fail at this point of first contact, then you must recover from the ten, twenty or maybe thirty other poor impressions that resulted from the unfortunate FIRST impression.

Remember...eleven judgements in just seven seconds. That's the power of first impressions! You choose. Do you use that power to your benefit, or to the detriment of you and your customer?

Do you see what I see

Visual numbness. That's what happens when we enter the same place of business day after day, after day. We become blind, or at the very least, desensitized to our surroundings. We stop noticing the stained or worn carpet, the chair with the loose arm, or the walls in need a fresh coat of paint. Sadly we do stop noticing, but our customers do not. Our customers take it all in with the wide eyes of a four year old.

Think of your immediate impressions as you approach a place of business for the first time. What if there was an overflowing trash can just outside the door? How about employees smoking at the front entrance? What if the bushes were untrimmed or the flower beds were full of weeds? At this stage of the game – it's all in the details. Be attentive to them.

If the shoe fits...

Ever been to Kassis Brothers Shoe Store on Sam Rittenberg? Now there's a place that understands service! First impressions right through to last ones – they cover it all. Sure there are stores with flashier displays and more gimmicky sales promotions. But this is a store from the good ol' days...a store where you are greeted with a genuine smile and a warm word of welcome. They not only know the shoe business, they know the people business. Even on a crowded Saturday, it's somehow worth the wait.