

How a Tea Shop Mastered the Art of Customer Service

BY RITIKA PURI



While most small business owners understand the value of customer service, the concept can sometimes seem vague. That is because customer service is an area where art meets science.

Kim Nguyen and Cindy Thai, owners of The Loose Teas in Southern California, know this all too well. Six years after their specialty café and bookstore opened, their commitment to customer service remains a fundamental part of the business's daily operations.

Here, they share how they worked to improve customer service.

Believe in your vision and product

Nguyen and Thai had always dreamed of opening a specialty café and bookstore together, and their passion remains a fundamental part of the business's daily operations.

"What I love most about tea is its ability to calm and soothe," Nguyen says. "Whether you drink tea alone or with friends, you just can't help but feel good and at ease. Cindy and I try to

create that environment at the tea shop as well by using tea to help customers start their days off right or as a nightcap at the end of a long day."

Connect with your customers

According to Nguyen, small business owners should make a strong effort to understand and value their customers. Every day, she and Thai are on the ground floor, learning patrons' names and answering their questions.

"I value integrity," Nguyen says. "It's important for us to always be on the floor because it's where our customers are. We want to make ourselves accessible to create a friendly and intimate experience. We don't have any interest in setting up our business in a way that we find too cold or mechanical."

Loyalty and referrals are invaluable

Small businesses have a range of advertising options. However, marketing costs can be a challenge for any business. As a free and high-yield alternative, local businesses should focus on

long-term, organic growth. Nguyen reminds business owners that persistence is key.

"We placed various mailers and ads in the local papers but nothing really consistent as we were working with a tight budget. Word-of-mouth definitely has been the biggest driving force behind our growth," Nguyen says. "It took a while before business really took off, but Cindy and I continued our best efforts to get the word out and earn new customers. It wasn't until December 2006 that I felt our efforts began to pay off when customers that we had made throughout that first year came back to the shop during the holidays looking to buy gifts and place orders."

Be true to yourself

Nguyen reminds business owners to remember the practical considerations of customer service. While happy customers are invaluable, businesses should always uphold their interests and vision.

"During our first couple of years, many of our customers expressed to

us that they wanted us to offer a larger coffee menu. Wanting to please our customers, we invested in coffee equipment and gave our coffee drinks prominent space on the menu board," Nguyen says. "Our coffee sales went up but the perception of us as a specialty tea shop changed. What had made us different and unique, which was that we were a specialty tea shop that brewed tea drinks to order, now seemed pretty insignificant. Today we still offer a small coffee menu, but it never detracts from the teas, which now always stays front and center."

Keep an open mind

Even with strong sales records and customer experience efforts, businesses have room to learn.

"We generally get pretty positive feedback from our customers regarding our customer service but we are always striving to be better," Nguyen says. "There's always something new to learn or improve upon."