

Wanted: E-Commerce Leaders

Everything You Do Should Focus on the Customer

"A business that fails to satisfy its customers is worth nothing."

I made that statement in *"e-Service,"* a book I wrote in 2001 about how to build a successful e-commerce business, and it's as true today as it was then. If you don't give your customers what they want, when they want it, and how they want it, you won't be in business long.

If you want to survive—and thrive—especially during these tough economic times, it's critical that you focus on customer service. If you don't believe that, look at Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of amazon.com, which had sales in 2011 of \$48 billion, a 41 percent increase over the previous year.

Amazon has 164 million customers, more than 20 million products—and a reputation of providing unprecedented customer service. There is no denying that Bezos is an e-commerce leader, and you would be wise to emulate his ideas and his drive. He has proven that blending customer service with technology can result in huge rewards.

You, too, can be an e-commerce leader. Start by taking these steps:

- **Understand your business.** No matter what products or services you are selling, your core business is customer service. Everything you do must be built around providing customers with the best experience possible. Not only does

that keep customers coming back to you, it results in priceless word-of-mouth advertising.

- **Be available.** You must be available to your customers 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you have an IVR, throw it away or, better yet, give it to one of your competitors. Hire people to answer your phones. Nothing says service like the ability to talk to a real person. And don't—I repeat, don't—outsource your call centers to someplace like the Philippines. If you do, you're placing yourself on a suicide watch.

- **Make it easy for customers to do business with you.** Realize that there are many doors customers can come through, and make sure those doors are open wide. Some customers prefer to do everything on the Internet; they don't care to engage in conversation with another person. Others, like me, prefer to talk to someone. And, still others like a combination of technology and personal contact, often doing research about a product or service online and then wanting to talk to someone who can answer their questions before they make a purchasing decision.

- **Be competitive in your pricing.** Good prices and great service—what more could a customer want? Service leaders are very aggressive at reducing costs

and passing the savings on to their customers.

Forbes magazine, in an April 23, 2012, article on Bezos quoted him as saying, "There are two kinds of companies: those that try to charge more and those that work to charge less. We will be the second." He goes on to say that frugality is one of eight official company values at Amazon. It should be one of yours, too.

Look for ways to reduce costs. That includes eliminating policies and procedures that get in the way of serving the customer. Those policies and procedures cost a lot, including the salaries of the people you hire to develop and enforce them. Train and empower your people to serve your customers; don't hinder them with needless rules.

- **Hire smart.** Look for people who like people; you can train them to be knowledgeable about your products and services, but you can't train them to genuinely enjoy working with—and for—your customers. Hire people who are smart and personable, and you'll have a winning combination. **RO**

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