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FBO MATTERS

AUTHOR Douglas Wilson



BREAKING BREAD: Attraction and Retention of an FBO's Customers

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER in business, and when the chips are down, I look to my relationships with my fellow humans at that company, not a procurement contract with a performance clause, to save the day.

The attraction and retention of customers today is a science — particularly in the online environment. Like it or not, complex algorithms track our every purchase, and potential upsells or other items — even by other retailers

— are carefully curated and presented for our consumption.

For all but the most vigilant about their online privacy, or perhaps those more conspiracy-minded, “big data” can largely predict our behavior patterns as buyers of goods and services. Perhaps this very article was presented to you because your online profile identifies you work in the field of aviation. Whatever the cause, the rise of online consumerism has a blind spot, and a big one: When we interact in real-life with other humans as part of a transaction for those good or services, we humans become awfully unpredictable as consumers.

Let me explain. When sitting behind

the relative safety of our keyboards, we can examine a retailer's offerings at our own pace and make an informed decision — at least we think. We may browse a retailer's website, which in turn may lead us to read about the company that produces the item, which can then lead us to peruse say, Amazon, to see if we can find the same item at lower cost. Once convincing ourselves we're ready to make an informed decision, we then may begin reading online reviews as confirmatory diligence, only to now question our potential choice. As doubt enters our minds, we instead place the item in an online shopping cart to sit for days, week or eternity, providing big data even more data about what to show us next time in our online feed.

Compare this to making a choice between two-to-three brick-and-

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mortar retailers— the ones that still exist of course. Assuming relatively similar prices and products, what informs our decision as consumers to buy from one over another? Simple: Your interaction with the humans employed by that retailer. Here's what a human can do that our electronic devices will never replace: We can care about each other. We can take an interest in our customers. We can show empathy when others are having a bad day, demonstrate compassion when it's needed most, and yes, apologize genuinely when we made a mistake.

Likewise, we can also be apathetic, uncaring or distracted by those same electronic devices, the same ones that fetch us the entire knowledge of the world on a moment's notice. When this occurs, we confirm to our fellow humans — our customers — it's probably easier just to buy online. While I'm not about to paint a dystopian future of purely electronic consumerism, I am advocating that we look backwards in our history as consumers — not forwards — for guidance on how we attract and retain customers at the FBO level. And while I apologize in advance to those professional procurement managers of the industry, let's be honest: No one ever had a great customer service experience and called the corporate procurement office to thank them for choosing vendor based on their well-thought RFP submittal.

Attracting and retaining customers at the FBO level is the same. To build your customer base, one must build and maintain relationships continuously. I'm not suggesting for a moment that marketing, advertising and social media don't have a role in customer attraction — metaphorically though, that's just the colorful plumage of a parrot. To get customers to return to the nest time and again, it takes a lot more than pretty feathers. While the digital world may attract a customer or two to your FBO, it is the humans that keeps them there.

What might this look like in practice? For the purposes of this example, let's consider an airport with more than one FBO. Competitive FBOs track every plane that comes to an airport, use software to determine where the plane came from, where it is going, how much fuel it may take, and may even email multiple customers after the fact with an invitation, coupon or discount to try them next time they visit that airport. Clever, perhaps. Impersonal for sure.

Instead, why not take five minutes, use that same software to select just one customer from your competitor's ramp that flew in that day and hand write them a note. Be sure to mail it to them, because the US Postal Service needs customers too. In your letter, tell them you noticed they came in to the airport, and you'd love to meet them and treat them to lunch next time they're through. Include your business card and write something on it too — "safe flying, looking forward to meeting you next time." And whatever you do in your letter, don't market your FBO. Sound crazy?

Imagine for a moment you come home after reading this article and find a hand-written note from a competitor of a business you frequently visit. Now imagine the business you frequently visit has never once sent you a note. Or perhaps they had some recent personnel changes and they don't know your name anymore when you visit. Might you now accept that free offer of lunch? As a brief aside, before you adopt this idea, take your existing customers to lunch first — starting with your based customers.

Here's where the attraction part is easy. When given the opportunity to have lunch, do not under any circumstances, pitch your FBO to them — unless they ask specifically. You are meeting them, another human, with incredible life stories that they're dying to tell. Ask them questions about them, listen more than you speak, be genuine and care. That's it.

As you drive back to the airport, the geography alone will pivot the conversation to the FBO they chose that day and why. Maybe it's price, maybe their scheduler told them to go there, or maybe it was "a passenger request." Regardless, if the conversation turns to FBO selection, your answer is the same, and simple: First, don't disparage your competitor — after all, they chose your competitor. Second, don't pitch your FBO in a way any other than humbly — we're pretty proud of our team here. Finally, genuinely thank them for their time and let them know how much you enjoyed meeting them. A week later, a simple follow up email is appropriate to thank them again.

Here's how the math works on this very analog attraction method: If you send five notes a week, you've spent less than half an hour on customer prospecting, and it cost around \$2.75. Per month it's all of \$11. By the way, stay human when sending notes and use stamps for handwritten notes; never send a handwritten note using metered mail. If even one of those five mailings resulted in a customer lunch, you've committed to all of \$50 per week (one lunch) or \$200 per month. Even the most austere FBO marketing budgets can afford such luxury. Finally, if even half of those customers you took to lunch — which was a mere 10 percent of your initial letter campaign — became new customers, you would have spent \$211 per month to add two new customers that month. Annually, that's nearly 25 new customers, for around \$2,500 total.

Few customer attraction and retention initiatives have a better ROI than the simplest of them all — breaking bread with your customers. ▽



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