



YOUR BUSINESS

SMALL BUSINESSES
CAN PROFIT FROM THE ART
OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

WORDS: YTASHA L. WOMACK
IMAGE: CHRISTINE BALDERAS

GOOD rappport



A questionable economy may be the big issue looming for businesses these days, but not every business will feel the brink of the downturn.

"Those with the strongest customer service will weather the storm," says Chris Bryant, CEO of Rapport Strategies and an expert in customer service management and business etiquette. As director of training and certified speaker for The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Co., he trained the top 1% of service professionals in the world. He's worked with the "big three" in customer service, lending his first-class expertise to Nordstrom, Inc., The Ritz-Carlton and the Walt Disney Company.

Based in Los Angeles, Bryant is a certified etiquette consultant and creator of The Art of Rapport™, a methodology he developed that equips business and sales professionals to build success in their interactions. He is also co-authoring a book on service excellence and some of his clients include Nestle USA, the California Restaurant Association, Hotel Association of Los Angeles and the California Department of Education.

Yet Bryant also has a special interest in the small business owner whom he feels is also capable of delivering world-class service. While a small business owner may not know how they fare in comparison to the Ritz, Bryant urges them to step up to the challenge. "Don't compare yourself with who they are today but compare yourself with where they were when they were a start-up."

Many business owners say that service is important but a tunnel vision focus on bottom lines and products can inadvertently cause "lip service to real service," he says. "Most either aren't aware of the power of great service or they don't know how."

According to a Gallop poll, some \$300 billion leaves the economy due to bad customer service. The Small Business Administration states that poor customer service is the num-

ber one reason customers leave and never return. They also found that most small business owners fixate on product and price.

"Most just think that good service is that the customer is satisfied or that we need to be nice. But world-class service providers realize that it's about cultivating loyalty."

Bryant's Tips for Achieving Loyalty

1) You have to meet their basic need in a great way. "Most stop at the first step, states Bryant. "They say 'hey, we did the job.' What they don't realize is there's no difference between them and the 15 other people who can do the same thing."

2) Engage them on a personal level. "Build a personal connection. Engage them in conversation in a very memorable way. Use their name and remember things about them," he urges.

3) Exceed their expectations. Do something they weren't expecting. "Let's say you take your car to get it fixed at the shop," says Bryant. "The car was dirty when it came in. Not only did they fix the car, they washed the car. That's exceeding their expectations."

Bryant refers to his personal mechanic as an example. "I go back to the same guy because he's done these three things for me. How many mechanics are there in town? There are a lot of shops between my house and his shop. They may be cheaper, but I don't care. I know he's going to take care of me."

But if you're a small business owner, where do you begin?

Make service a core value. What kind of experience should a customer have when they work with your company? Write what you expect of yourself and your employees when

a customer walks in the door. Write it out and clearly communicate it. Define it and be crystal clear of what the company's name represents.

Hire people who share your company's values. "Hire for service and train for function," Bryant says. Most companies need a warm body, so they hire for function and then hope for service. "I can train you to work a computer or answer the phone but I can't teach you to be warm and fuzzy."

Be an example for your employees. "The leader has to exemplify those core values," says Bryant.

The big three hold to this firmly, Bryant notes. "None of these things cost much money. The cost compared to the value is little to nothing." ^{nv}

For more info visit: www.mrchrisbryant.com



"Those with the strongest customer service will weather the storm,"

—Chris Bryant,
CEO, Rapport Strategies