

The ABCs of Competing on Customer Service with Better-resourced Companies



By MICAH SOLOMON

If your company has limited resources and modest means, there are still ways to follow in the footsteps of the customer service-focused companies with nearly unlimited budgets that you hear so much about: Apple and Zappos, Mercedes-Benz and Lexus, Amazon and Nordstrom.



Consider this: None of these venerable brands initially commanded the kind of resources they have today. For example, neither the Nordstrom brothers nor Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak began their organizations with the kind of resources and advantages that you associate with their companies today. Rather, they started with what they had at the time, and they learned to make the most of it. What follows here are three principles – the A B Cs, if you will – that will help you to do the same: to do your best in customer service and the customer experience, no matter how limited your resources.

A. Make the relationship personal with your customer.

Don't overlook a big advantage that you may have over your larger competitors: the ability to keep your relationship with customers personal. I don't mean faux-personalization (Dear [fill-in-the-blank], we appreciate your visit with us on [fill-in-the-date]), but actual, authentic, personal communication and interaction. Let your customers know that they are appreciated every time they visit you, missed when they leave (or when you don't see them for a while), and that their business matters to you. You'll

be surprised at how powerful these three steps are as customer-retention and business-growth strategies. As the leader of a smaller business, you're better-positioned to keep up with every single customer than your larger-scale competitors are, no matter how well-financed they may be. Use this ability to your advantage, and you may not be small for long.

B. Use available, even off-the-shelf, options to level the playing field.

For example, if you're a small-scale retailer, you don't have the technological backbone of a Nordstrom, whose in-house team can fully customize Nordstrom's point of sale (POS) systems in a way that your company cannot. But you can purchase off-the-shelf solutions that will similarly stop the traffic jam at the register, by allowing every employee to take on the duties of a cashier. If you're competing with Amazon (as so many of us are), although you can't develop your own inventory-tracking systems in-house as they have, you can find alternatives that will provide the level of transparency that customers, who have been "trained" by their experiences with Amazon, are now demanding.

C. Create a repeatable routine that reinforces and sustains high service levels.

Start a daily, or, at the least, weekly, "huddle" where your employees and leadership can share best practices, discuss how they overcame customer service hurdles, and, perhaps most of all, celebrate customer service victories. It's not always what's measured that improves; it's what's celebrated. The greatest organizations have become great in part by building into their schedules opportunities to celebrate employees when they go the extra mile for customers.

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