

Good (high-quality) customer service is not necessarily the norm any longer, especially with large companies. For small businesses, quality customer service is essential to ensure that customers are satisfied and that the company listens to customers. Customer service is one area where small businesses can out-perform large companies.

It's funny what you find out once you start talking to people. I found this to be true when I spent some time with Dave Arnold, owner of Vacuums Etc., in Tacoma. I met Dave through the karate school where we are both students, and he's got quality customer service down to a "science". Okay, not actual science, however he completely understands that selling vacuums is more than just pushing product out the door. Dave is committed to creating sincere relationships with his customers and nurturing a connection with new customers.

Dave and his staff strive to educate customers in-person and with online videos rather than simply selling customers. He realizes that creating a meaningful relationship with customers, and caring about the customers, creates loyal customers. Those loyal customers keep coming to see Dave and refer friends to Vacuums Etc.

Every interaction with a customer is a chance to build on the relationship with that customer. I saw first-hand how the Vacuums Etc. staff deals directly with customers. The staff realizes that every interaction with customers cements that relationship. Dave knows that good customer service starts the moment a potential customer walks through the door and continues during the initial interaction. Every customer that walks in experiences the welcoming atmosphere. I am impressed that every customer that came in was greeted with a handshake and a smile.

If you deal with Vacuums Etc. over the phone, the staff is courteous and professional. On top of that, the well-trained Vacuums Etc. staff solve problems in a pleasant and efficient manner. Best of all, they remember you. All the company's associates deal with customers on a friendly, personal level.

When it comes to educating customers on the products that Vacuums Etc. carries, Dave and his staff excel. Dave knows that guiding customers to an educated decision will create a satisfied customer. If a customer is in the market for a new vacuum, Dave will explain the advantages and disadvantages of the various materials and designs.

For example, not all plastic used in vacuum cleaners is created equal. Vacuums that include polycarbonate plastic can handle a lot of abuse. Check to see if the handle is plastic or metal. Flip over the vacuum and see if the roller is plastic, metal, or wooden. I now know the difference between direct-flow and indirect-flow design. Direct-flow motors by design have superior suction because the motor is only inches from the aperture and therefore is far better at deep cleaning carpets. Vacuums that have an indirect-flow design have slightly less suction due to the motor being farther away from the vacuum's aperture. These vacuums usually

incorporate a long hose in the design. The advantage with indirect-flow vacuums is that specialized attachments can be placed on the end of the hose to clean furniture, draperies, stairs, and general areas that a direct-flow vacuum is not able to reach.

I have always been one who tends to buy professional/commercial-grade products over consumer-grade. Generally, commercial-grade vacuums can handle more abuse than standard consumer-grade vacuums. Let's be honest, we can all tend to at times treat equipment with a little less care when that equipment is not ours. Be aware, legally the major differentiating factor between consumer and commercial-grade vacuums is that commercial vacuums have either an orange or yellow cord.

Also, I'm a big believer in the adage, "You get what you pay for." As Dave says, "Sometimes it's better to spend the money to get something that is going to last longer." Let's put this in a financial perspective. A high-quality vacuum will last 20 years at a cost of anywhere from \$30 to \$40 per year. A cheaper vacuum may only cost \$200 but will last only 3 years. A cost of \$66.67 per year. If for nothing else, quality vacuums saves carpets.

The two main takeaways from my in-depth conversation with Dave about Vacuums Etc. and researching vacuums are:

1. **Good Customer Service** – good customer service is essential for the longevity of any business. The interaction between Vacuums Etc. and the customer is more than just a sale. The staff creates the connection when the customer walks in the door or has an interaction online. Customers are "greeted with a smile and a handshake" either in the store or in the virtual world. The focus is about developing the relationship.
2. **Educate the Customer** – an educated customer is a satisfied customer. Satisfied customers are the best form of promotion for any business. Satisfied customers become a company's brand advocates. Vacuum Etc. takes the time with customers and does an incredible job of educating customers on every facet of the business – no matter if you are buying a vacuum or need service on a vacuum.