

Illustration by Matt Mastrud for The Partner Channel



I'VE **Lessons Learned** FROM MY **Customers**

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As a person who has the enviable job of telling other people what to do (in a nice way, of course), one of the basic principles I advocate as a marketing consultant is “listen to your customers.” Too often we become disengaged from our customers while we focus on tackling marketing strategies, tracking metrics, creating presentations, following up on prospects, and 100 other things that can consume our time.

In the last four-plus years of consulting, I've had the opportunity to work with numerous wonderful clients (aka Partners and ISVs) and a few less-than-wonderful clients. Every one of them has taught me valuable management lessons, pushed me to learn more, and made me better for the experience. Here are my top five marketing take-aways that you can apply to your own customer base:

Change Your Mindset

Are you part of the team? Or are you regarded as "just a vendor" who is only contacted when absolutely necessary? If you are part of the team, then congratulations! It means you've established that "trusted advisor" relationship with your customers that we all desire. It also means that not only will your customers call you when they need your products and services, but they will also talk about you positively with their associates, they will be a great referral or influencer resource, and they will be happy to give you testimonials for your marketing collateral.

If you're not part of your customers' team, they will often search for other vendors or resellers when they need something. We all know how easy it is to just pop on the Internet and start looking for the product/service needed instead of calling the Partner. Case in point: one of my clients expressed great frustration to find out that a customer had bought Microsoft Dynamics® CRM from a competitor. When I asked how often this Partner contacted the customer, the answer was, "We check in once a year to see if they need anything." No wonder the competitor was able to get the business – the original Partner wasn't even in the running when the customer needed new software.

Don't Be Afraid to Give

When economic conditions are tough, it can be hard to think about giving something away. After all, you're concerned about making payroll, paying the bills, supporting the marketing budget, and everything else that comes with running a business. But something I've learned from my customers is the value of giving. Sure, it's likely to mean you're not going to get paid for some of your time, and that potentially means lost billable revenue. On the positive side, you've made an impression on those customers they're not likely to forget. And better yet, they might even tell one, two, or five more people about it.

However, that shouldn't be the sole rea-

son you give. Do it because you want to, do it because it's the right thing, and/or do it because it makes YOU feel good.

Remember to Say "Thank You"

This can be/should be a hugely important part of your relationship with your customers (and your spouse, your children, your friends, and so on). It's not hard to say thank you when on the phone or in an e-mail, but taking it the extra step is well worth the time.

- » Send a hand-written note of thanks to your client (tuck your business card in it) for their business, for a referral, for a testimonial, or for completing a favorable review of your firm on Microsoft PinPoint™ (www.pinpoint.microsoft.com/en-US/).
- » Send a gift to commemorate their company anniversary, your company anniversary, or other significant occasion. For example, I sent environmentally friendly water-powered clocks to clients and associates to celebrate the one-year anniversary of The Partner Marketing Group. A personal note of thanks for their support was included.
- » Thank your customers by making a donation to their favorite cause. Everyone benefits (you, the customer, the charity)!
- » Thank your customers for attending functions – user groups, lunch 'n' learns, launch events – by having the event collateral (presentation, handouts, brochures) on a company-branded jump drive they can take back to the office. Another example: when at Great Plains, we always stashed a few t-shirts or hats behind the booth to thank any customers who happened to stop by and say hello. It doesn't cost a lot, and people will remember it.

Have Fun

This lesson might seem a bit odd. We all want to have fun working with our customers, don't we? Examine your attitude: do you convey enthusiasm, excitement, anticipation, and happiness when you're communicating with a customer? Do they feel appreciated and welcomed when speaking with you? Or do you make them feel like they've interrupted your important day, and you'll get to their questions when you're good and ready?

When I get on the phone with a client for our weekly marketing call, I'm ALWAYS in a great mood. (Or at least the client should think so.) My customer doesn't really care if I'm tired, or suffering from a cold, or in the

"I don't feel like working today" mood. Plus, if I act as if I'm cheerful, then it doesn't take long before I truly am.

NOTE: After you've left the meeting, the customer should remember that (a) you were prepared, (b) you were enthusiastic about his/her business, and (c) you had a solution for him/her or will find a solution.

See You Around

My local Sunday newspaper has a section called "See You Around." The roving photographer takes photographs of people at events, ice cream socials, fun in the park, craft fairs, and the like. Readers examine this section closely each week to see if they or their friends show up in the photos.

Do your customers "see you around"? Are you featured in any press releases or customer stories? Do you participate in networking functions at your local Chamber of Commerce or Small Business Administration? Do you hold user group meetings or a holiday gathering so you can personally meet with your customers? Do you advertise in the publications or on the Web sites where your customers are reading?

Take that one step further – in a virtual way. Are you connected to your customers via LinkedIn or Twitter? Do you write a blog or send a newsletter so they can see you around (online)?

All in all, my lessons learned are probably not much different from the ones you already know. It all goes back to the concept of nurturing the relationship with the customer. You don't have to "friend them" (to use a Facebook term), but they do want to know you're more than just a salesperson looking at your own bottom line.

Remember, you have the ability to create the experience a customer has with you. After all, they can get "debits and credits" from anyone up the street. Customers buy the experience (you and your team!) in addition to the product you're selling. If it is a good experience before, during, and after the sale, that customer will keep returning, referring, and being your biggest asset. If you incorporate the five lessons above into your customer marketing, you'll notice the results! 🌟

You can see Cheryl Strege of The Partner Marketing Group around at The Partner Event in September, online at www.thepartnermarketinggroup.com, via a blog at <http://www.channelprosemb.com/blog/13/Cheryl-Strege>, or perhaps high atop Devils Tower some evening.