

TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

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Customers: Key brand advocates



With increased competition and countless messages to consumers, to say communication in today's business world is "complex" seems like an

understatement, and companies everywhere are struggling to keep up with the pace. With so many avenues for conveying your organization's message, businesses need to put consumers to work by engaging them as brand advocates. Word of mouth has been a steadfast tool in every business' toolbox probably since business was invented. There are great opportunities to think smarter about using this tried and true vehicle to help your business grow.

We all know that word of mouth is powerful, but take a moment to assess the facts. The first step is to identify your present strengths; if I were to ask you to name your top five clients or consumers, you could recite that list without skipping a beat. Those people are your "brand advocates." They are loyal to your product or service, engaged in your industry and enthusiastic about your business. Computer electronics company Apple, with less than 10 percent of the computer market, is a great example of a business that relies heavily on the loyalty of their core consumers to generate interest in their products. How they handle those relationships is an integral part of Apple's brand management and identity.

Investing in your advocates has the potential for huge payoffs for businesses. According to marketing author and blogger George Silverman, people are likely to act on about one in three recommendations that come from word of mouth—that's significantly higher than the conversion rates for traditional marketing. The key to any client relationship is great customer service that makes a positive impression. Be willing to go the extra mile for clients by creating additional value for them. If you own a restaurant, offer loyal diners the opportunity to sample new menu items (free of charge) and ask for their feedback. Even for customers who aren't "brand advocates," imagine how much repeat business (and word-of-mouth opportunity) you would encourage if you offered a free sample of dessert at the end of a meal.

Public relations consultant and writer Alan Pell Crawford interviews ComBlu's Steve Hershberger on the subject in an article titled "Word-of-mouth communications." According to Hershberger, your brand advocates typically consume 300 percent more than other customers, and account for 300 to 1,500 percent more in business. Businesses should work closely with these advocates to gather feedback on how they can improve their services, engage them with new products and access their connections with your target audience.

Of course, no matter how hard businesses try, the occasional problem of negative word-of-mouth communication arises. Make sure your business fosters an internal culture of understanding when dealing with client complaints, and let clients know to "tell me first." Address their concerns openly and collaboratively so that you can work quickly to address and resolve them to everyone's satisfaction. Treating your critics as well as you treat your advocates is the best opportunity you have to change their perspective, as well as what they communicate to others about your business.

Word-of-mouth marketing isn't just something that happens, and it's important to be active in the process. Reaching out to brand advocates can be as simple as going the extra mile to offer complimentary products for their feedback, or hosting an on-site forum where like-minded individuals can meet to discuss an industry-related topic. This really boils down to engaging in a proactive relationship with your advocates; rather than focusing on how you can use them to promote your message, figure out what their needs are—and they'll be more than happy to do all the talking. 

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