



Building Customer Loyalty: *What A Crock . . .*

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The reason this popular expression (“What a Crock”) ends where it does is because the balance of the phrase is commonly understood to contain a term we all learned early in our youth not to use unless we wanted our mouths washed out with soap. In the Western culture at least, these 3 words are more than enough though . . . perfect for conveying disbelief, discontent -- and with the right tone, even disgust. The intent is rarely lost on anyone who hears it, and I’ve certainly used it myself on numerous occasions.

Today however, I submit the term “crock” as a positive one – placing it in direct contrast with its modern rival, the microwave . . . in hopes of describing **exactly what it really takes to Achieve & Sustain True Customer Loyalty**.

In our home, the microwave gets more action than any other modern convenience. Popcorn, nachos, hotdogs, hot chocolate, mac & cheese, re-heated leftovers – these are the staples of our Two-Earner, Two-Teen household during the week -- and our lives would be severely disrupted if we were to lose our “nuke-ability.” On the weekends however . . . we make a point of preparing higher quality fare. Dad grills, Mom bakes, Kelly sautés, and Katie fries. Well OK, we’re true Southerners – We all fry. But my point is, given the resources (in this case, quality ingredients and ample time) each of us much prefer traditionally prepared foods over the “zap and slap” menu we’ve allowed to creep into our busy lifestyle. Recognizing this caloric roller coaster was surely playing havoc with our health, last year we sought out and re-discovered a partial solution . . . **The Crock Pot**.

At least once a week now -- I raid the freezer and throw just a few simple ingredients in the crock before going to bed. By early afternoon the next day, we have the most tender poultry, pork, or beef gently bubbling away in a bath of broth and some tantalizing combination of vegetables at the end of our kitchen island. The aroma alone is enough to bring back old memories of after church dinner at Grandmother’s. (Sometimes I even walk outside for a few minutes – for no other reason than to enjoy that first fresh whiff upon my return.) The kids – and even their friends -- look forward to the same experience when they come in from school.

It’s still not exactly a scene from “Ozzie & Harriet.” Katie might attend her self-appointed dinner hour in cleats and shin guards -- while Mom is on the phone extolling the virtues of Human Capital Management to her new clients in Shanghai, Dad tries to squeeze in one more sales call, and Kelly refines her latest moves at cheerleading practice. But it is a distinct and welcome departure from the hectic norm -- and since “crock night” has become a weekly discipline, we do enjoy some of the benefits that only consistency and repetition can bring.

I share this experience with you for a reason . . . I see so many organizations attempting to “microwave” their Sales & Marketing efforts. Meaning . . . they often apply short, high energy bursts toward lead generation, skills training, customer service, and everything in between. More to the point, this “hurry up and do something” practice runs rampant when it comes to *Customer Loyalty* programs.

Now I’m all for FAST -- In fact, I literally [wrote the book on SPEED®](#) a few years ago. But as I observed in that work, and try to convey in my work today – true speed is **Results** divided by time . . . And so often, the **results** from these *program-mentality*, sometimes even *crisis-driven* efforts are about as appetizing as zapping yesterday’s fish on High for 45 seconds, drowning it in ketchup, and calling it dinner.

The best Customer Loyalty programs aren’t . . . “programs” that is. Loyalty (from anyone) is the product of deliberate attention and genuine service -- consistently applied, faithfully monitored, and carefully nurtured . . . best prepared at a moderate, even “temperature” -- over enough time to cultivate deep relationships and draw out the richest qualities and subtle advantages that only true allegiance can or will provide.

Anyone who simply does what they say they will do, and is reasonably nice about it can “microwave” a few repeat sales -- but this is a far cry from true *Customer Loyalty*, and the tremendous long term benefits you could be realizing. Truly *loyal* customers don't simply respond to %-off deals, remembered birthdays, and diligent follow-up with an additional purchase or two. They have a steadfast devotion to your success -- a level of **emotional commitment** and a feeling of attachment that compels them to go well beyond “repeat customer” and apply **discretionary effort** on your behalf and in your interest – again, and again.

I'm not suggesting you abandon your current incentives -- and you should certainly engage in most, if not all of those activities recommended in that nifty Customer Service presentation from last year's meeting. What I am suggesting is that you don't confuse this standard fare with **what it really takes to achieve and sustain the genuine article – True Customer Loyalty** – or worse yet, employ these strategies and tactics solely in response to crisis or that inspiring book your Manager gave you at the office Christmas party. Most efforts borne of crisis or inspiration are ill-conceived, short lived, and rarely produce sustainable results. And in so many cases – just like the long term negative effects of crash diets on the body, these “microwave” efforts actually do more harm than good in the long run.

What It Really Takes:

- **Crock vs. Microwave** mentality

Much like financial rewards for the diligent investor, *True Customer Loyalty* compounds in value 24/7 – even while you sleep . . . magnifying original effort, and rewarding consistent discipline. Provided of course, that you possess and employ **repeatable, transferable methods for creating the type of ongoing customer experience that warrants loyalty.**

- **The Right Ingredients** (Disciplines)

Since I don't have the benefit of knowing your organization or your market at this point, you'll have to design, refine and execute the specific methods that make sense for your unique situation on your own – but I can share with you the core ingredients . . . the non-negotiable “must haves” for any practical *Customer Loyalty* recipe:

The 5 Most Important Loyal “T”s

1. Teaching

- Teach them How to Buy

Even customers who have already purchased from you once, often don't really know when, how, or why to buy from you again. Because we sell “it” everyday -- whatever “it” is for you -- sometimes we forget this. (This is very prevalent in my specialty – *Solving Sales Problems for Training & Consulting firms*, but I'm learning it's not uncommon in most arenas.)

- Teach them How to Sell

A well served customer is often more than happy to “sell” you further into their own organization and into their extended network – particularly when you consistently apply the other four disciplines below . . . IF . . .

. they only knew how. Tell them. Tell them exactly what to say and how to say it. (While you're at it, ask them to do the same for you – See # 5.)

2. Tapping (their experience)

There's just no substitute for customer experience. How exactly are they using your product / service? What has been the greatest challenge?, the greatest benefit?. What would they change if they could? You might be surprised at what you can learn. The data alone is reason enough to gather this information – vital intelligence we can apply to new product development, and new sales opportunities . . . but beyond that, simply **engaging** the customer in helping you become a better provider is pure gold.

3. Testing

Similar to number 2 above (for the “engagement” value), but also the most valid source of reliable feedback available. This can range from casually bouncing a new idea off of them to formal beta testing on a new product / service. Both – and everything in between – are marvelous methods for deepening the relationship and creating what client nurture guru, Don Rigby calls a “Customer for Life.”

4. Talking

Yes, talking to your customer on a regular basis (particularly when the conversation holds some immediate value for them) is a good idea. I suspect it's a recommendation found in virtually every book, slide deck, article, or white paper on the topic. And yes, it makes perfect sense to execute this communication through a variety of media. But what I'm suggesting here is that you and your team talk **about** your existing customers – regularly. They deserve just as much presence (maybe more) in your meetings and your sales strategy as your prospective customers.

5. Testifying

The minute someone becomes a customer (actually **before** – another topic for another day), you should be finding ways to help them get more business. Tell your other customers, your friends, neighbors, lovers, fishing buddies, bowling team, Sunday school class, vendors, family . . . virtually anyone you come in contact with about your individual customer, the company, and how they help people. If you're not already doing so, put some concerted effort into being the “guy who knows the guy.” Start building your reputation for getting people connected with the resources they need – whether you provide them or not.

Couple these five disciplines with good solid Customer Service 101 and your other post-sales Best Practices. Put the whole effort on simmer (put it all to work in a systematic way that doesn't blast your customer base with violent bursts of thinly disguised “marketing radiation”) -- and I assure you, you'll enjoy **True Customer Loyalty** . . . while your competitors continue to struggle with the limited utility of incentive programs, clever promotions, and standard follow up.

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