

FAST CLUB

SERVICE ALWAYS THE BEST SELLER

Some of the country's fastest-growing companies share their tips for winning over customers. **Report: Kate Mills**

● Great customer service lies behind the success story of every fast-growing company. As David Cohen, managing director of Matchbox stores, says: "Customer service is for the most part our key offering because we don't have a product differentiator. We offer brands that are reasonably readily available across the board in most shopping centres, so customer service is our differentiator."

But the elements that make up a great customer experience aren't always obvious. At a recent BRW Fast Club meeting, some of the country's fastest-growing companies offered tips on how to create a "wow" factor in customer service, as outlined below.

JOIN THE VALUE CHAIN

Executives who understand that a transaction must create value for a customer can sell more. This is particularly true where the value of a service is not instantly discernable.

At Axios IT, for example, managing director Jason Goodridge is aware of how IT systems are seen as a black hole in spending without necessarily delivering value. His guarantee to customers is that "whatever they spend with us they will save in terms of efficiency gain or improvement in quality". To make sure customers understand this, he meets them first and helps them to articulate what they hope to gain from implementing the system.

Even if it's hard to directly show a benefit, good companies try to share knowledge that could benefit customers. In Goodridge's case, he cites an occasion when he told a client about a research and development grant it could apply for. It saves \$30,000 a year from that tip.

HIRE GREAT STAFF

A fast-growing company knows good staff are vital to get customers to buy and



keep coming back. As Matchbox's Cohen says: "The biggest issue is that you can have the best systems, the best operational expertise and the best marketing campaign and it could all fall down because someone gives the customer a bad experience."

There's no exact science to having great staff but what owners stress is that engagement is key. "Having staff that put their energy into the business – well, customers can see and participate in that," Goodridge says.

GRACE AND GRATITUDE

In the rush to create the perfect customer experience in terms of smiling staff and fast service, companies can overlook the simple things such as saying "thank you".

Brad Miller, chief executive of management consultancy LiTMUS Group, says this is because "everyone wants a relationship [with the customer] because this is the mythical thing that can make sure that we stay in business. But everyone is so focused on this that you can miss the small things – like the simple follow-up of a thank you."

Marcus Lynch at recruiter Halcyon Knights says it's about taking a gracious approach in business. "Those two spoken words 'thank you' can go a long, long way in what we do."

IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT PRICE

Smaller companies think they have to discount to attract attention away from their larger rivals. But it's a dangerous strategy to buy customers by cutting margins. At My Coffee Shop, Carmelina

Round table: From left, Carmelina Pascoe, David Cohen and Brad Miller

Pascoe, says she sits unashamedly at the top end of the price spectrum for commercial coffee machines.

"We don't discount," Pascoe says. "We made a decision that we wanted to offer a particular level of service."

That doesn't stop customers asking for a discount. But once Pascoe points out that at a lower price they wouldn't get the service, installation, back-up or training, she says that customers then start to understand that you get what you pay for.

BE NIMBLE

The great thing about being a smaller organisation is that you can be nimble and accessible. Technology has been a great leveller between companies of all sizes and fast-growing companies use this to their advantage.

Milan Direct co-founder Dean Ramler uses technology to offer 24-hour service. Staff work around the clock so that customers who email a query at say 11pm will receive an immediate answer.

"If they get the information that they need, they can make a purchase straight away," he says.

It has also meant Ramler has been able to expand into Britain without having an office there. His night staff meet the British customers' daytime needs and his day staff their night-time enquiries.

He also uses twitter and Facebook to communicate with customers. A query on twitter can elicit a direct reply from him. "When customers are in the mood, they will buy so you have to be ready for them," he advocates. **BRW**



When customers are in the mood, they will buy, so you have to be ready for them

Milan Direct's
Dean Ramler