

A DOSE OF REALITY: THE IMPORTANCE OF FIRST IMPRESSIONS

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Have you ever placed a phone call to a business (especially a vendor or supplier) and listened to the phone ring a dozen times before anyone answered? Then, when someone finally did answer, he or she seemed bothered by your call?

If this was your first encounter with the company, what kind of impression were you left with? Did you feel the business valued its customers? More importantly, did you feel that their product or service was one of top quality? I don't think so.

But, you might say in their defense: Maybe it was just a bad day. Or, perhaps your experience was an isolated incident. It doesn't matter. As the old saying goes: You can never make more than one first impression.

Perception is reality. Let me share an example of this principle at work. My wife and I recently took our three year-old son to have his picture taken. We arrived 1- minutes before our scheduled appointment and were told we'd have to wait just a few minutes. Half an hour later (an eternity to a three year-old!), we finally had the picture taken. The place was a mess, the photographer was a slob. Leaving the studio, I had a gut feeling that we would not receive the high quality pictures we were hoping for. I was right. I've found that my initial perception of a company is usually right.

Now, let me share some excellent first impressions:

- Checking in at the St. Louis Marriott ...the Kansas City Marriott ... the Cleveland Marriott ...
- Changing reservations at United Airline's Executive Premier Desk ...
- Making reservations through Hertz #1 Gold Service ...
- Ordering from the Franklin Day Planner People ... or the Bass Pro Shop

I've had good experiences with these companies from the very first contact -- and every contact after that. As I said, my initial perception of a company is usually right.

Check yourself. What kind of first impression does your business present? How can you find out before it's too late? There are several different ways to collect customer feedback. They can be used together or separately. Either way, they are very effective -- any information is better than no information at all.

Phone Calls: Make phone calls to existing customers (new and long term) to find out their thoughts and impressions about your service.

Whenever possible, try to contact former customers to find out why they chose a competitor or decided not to purchase your service or product at all.

Reply Cards: Enclose a postage-paid customer response reply card with delivery of your product or service. Ask simple, short questions about the customer's initial encounter with your company.

Evaluation Forms: Ask customers or potential customers to fill out an evaluation form rating your company's performance from initial contact to product/service delivery. Evaluation forms tend to be more time consuming than reply cards, but they provide more in-depth information. You may want to consider offering the customer a discount or benefit for taking the time to complete the form.

Keeping on track. By employing any of the methods described above, you will become more aware of your customers' perceptions of your business and your service. And, as we know, perception is reality.

As managers, we need to know when our businesses are on the right track in order to continue providing the service that is expected. Likewise, it is imperative to know when our businesses have gone off the track in order to correct the situation immediately and cut our losses.

I believe it is the responsibility of the customer to provide feedback -- both good and bad. Therefore, it is your responsibility to provide feedback to your vendors and suppliers, just as you would like your customers to do for you.

In our quest for quality, let's not overlook the obvious: the value of a good first impression. So ask yourself, what kind of first impression do I present?

How about my department or company? If you don't measure up, take heart!
You can make the necessary changes to get back on track.

On the other hand, if you don't, you can console yourself with this thought:
You're not really a failure -- you're presenting an excellent bad example!