

Build A Better Service Team

Customer service is one of the most critical success factors in building and sustaining a competitive and profitable company in the promotional products industry. At the most basic level, your customers must be able to rely on your firm to consistently deliver on its commitments. This means hiring qualified employees with the right attitude who also demonstrate a strong commitment to providing superior service.

Regardless of the size of your business, you must ensure that everyone who has contact with your clients represents your company appropriately and delivers the quality of service necessary to keep customers satisfied and loyal. This applies not only to your sales representatives, but to every employee who has the occasion to interact with clients. Clearly, it's essential that your field sales personnel have the ability to build and sustain relationships clients. However it's equally important for your internal support staff to demonstrate these same skills.

Often, it's your customer service/sales support employees who are required to deal directly with a client when there's a problem with an order. In the case of distributors, these are also usually the employees charged with the responsibility of negotiating a solution or compromise with suppliers. Therefore, the individuals who fill these positions need strong interpersonal and negotiation skills, as well as a high degree of flexibility in how they approach their responsibilities. It's not enough to simply hire someone who has processed sales orders or worked in a customer service department. You need to ensure that every individual you hire has the skills, abilities and attributes necessary to deliver *high quality* customer service.

Avoid The Gut

One of the most common hiring mistakes is to base a decision on "gut instinct" or whether or not you "like" a candidate. This may help you identify those candidates who

are similar to you or those you feel you can get along with, but this isn't the best way to make a sound hiring decision. While you may believe you have the ability to accurately read and assess people, you need to be more practical and fact-based when evaluating job candidates.

A Three-Step Strategy

Developing a strategy is critical if you want to effectively recruit and select qualified candidates. The first step is to develop a realistic description of the position's responsibilities and the skills necessary to successfully perform them. Without an honest and accurate assessment of the requirements of the job, it's unlikely you'll be able to identify candidates best suited to the position. For example, companies will often attempt to recruit candidates by describing future growth opportunities, rather than focusing on the individual's skill and interest in performing the job at hand.

The second step involves planning for the interviews. This implies more than just reviewing the resumes and applications before you begin the meeting. To gain the most from the interview process, you need to take time up front to identify what you want to learn about the individual and how you'll get this information.

Based on the responsibilities you've identified, develop a list of questions to determine the interviewee's level of expertise in each area. The questions you pose should encourage candidates to share their experiences with you so you can understand their thought process - how and why they approached a situation in a particular manner. Your goal is not only to determine whether or not candidates have a skill, but if they're able to apply it in a variety of situations.

The third step, the interview itself, should be conducted in a way that challenges the candidate to think about previous experiences and how they could be applied within the context of your business. By providing candidates with an overview of how a

distributorship or supplier firm operates, you can frame questions that will provide you with insight into their level of experience, as well as their customer service philosophy.

Some examples:

- If a customer were to call and report a problem with an order that was clearly their fault and not ours, describe how you would handle it.
- If a supplier guaranteed that a high priority order would be shipped today and you were just advised that there was a production problem, how would you deal with the supplier and our client?
- Describe the most difficult situation you've ever had to resolve with a customer. How did you manage it? What was the final result?

By focusing on specific events and actions rather than asking broad-based questions, you'll be able to gain a better perspective of the individual's strengths and areas for development.

During the interview it is important to let the candidate to do most of the talking. As an interviewer, your role is to provide sufficient background information, ask questions that will require candidates to elaborate on their responses and to really listen to what they're saying. The same skills you use to "read" your clients and anticipate their needs to generate a sale can be applied to the interviewing process. Rather than a sale, your goal is to gain information and an in-depth understanding of the candidate.

Follow Up For Certainty

Finally, you need to measure each candidate against the criteria you've established. This is where it's essential to be objective in assessing the skill level and "fit" of each individual. If you're uncertain, don't hesitate to call the person and ask additional questions or set up another interview. In fact, it's a good practice to bring final candidates back for a second interview to follow up on any outstanding issues and see the

individual again. It may also be appropriate to have another employee meet with the candidate - just to get a second opinion.

There isn't a strict methodology for hiring quality customer service/sales support employees. However by following these, you can begin to take the guesswork out of the process and increase your chances of making a good hire.

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