

You're not Wal-Mart: And Why That's a Good Thing

The city where I live has recently seen an influx of the so-called 'Big Box' stores: a SuperMart where the regular old Mart used to be, a Home Improvement Center smack dab in the middle of a brand new development off the Interstate. My guess is that most small business retailers are pretty apprehensive when these Big Boxes enter or expand in a market. What does that mean for your customers? What does that mean for your business? In the short term, you may find that your customers 'flirt' with the new store: they may check it out once or twice and see what merchandise they offer. But after this flirtation, it is likely they'll come back to your store. Why?

- Your store is embedded in your community. Embedded can mean a couple of things in this case. Your store is likely to be in a better, more central location than a big box store moving into a new development on the outskirts of town. Your store is already on the daily commute of hundreds of customers and potential customers. In these days of tight schedules and high gas prices, customers will want to go to their local stores where they won't spend extra time or money to get what they want and need. So your location is a huge benefit for you.

You are also embedded in your community by being part of the fabric that makes your community special. You sponsor a Little League team and let the local Girl Scout troop sell its cookies out front. You are a member of the Rotary and volunteer in community efforts. Customers will want to support retailers that support the things that they are interested in and support also. In our book, we define this as 'social glue' that keeps people connected with each other. You have the opportunity to develop social glue that the Big Boxes never will.

- You can adjust to changes quickly and nimbly. If your customers ask about a new product or request a new service, you can immediately respond to their needs without having to go through miles of red tape. If you have a new product that your customers might be interested in, you can quickly email them with the news. If a snowstorm is predicted, you can let them know what products you have to help them cope with the expected bad weather. Reacting to what is happening right now in your customers' lives will be engaging and interesting to them, and help them understand the importance of your business to them.
- You can provide a personal touch, both in store and through the Internet. In the store, you and your associates can know customers by name and welcome them warmly when they come into the store, and quickly help them find the items they're looking for. You and your staff can make recommendations because you're so well-acquainted with your stock. And you can use the Internet to share information that you learn about with your customers. For example, if you receive news of new product innovations you can send it out to customers to see if the product is something they would be interested in. For example, your customers may be very interested in helping to save the environment. If your suppliers are designing more eco-friendly packaging, your customers might be interested in hearing about it. You can pass on news about negative product information, such as product recalls, in a very quick and efficient way.
- You can surprise your customers with offerings that they might not be able to find elsewhere, and they're not expecting to find at your store. The Big Box stores offer consistency in brands and pricing. You can offer those little surprises that make consumers feel they discovered a treasure: even little things like a new moisturizer or brand of candy, available only at your store, can get customers interested and involved.
- You appreciate your associates, and see them as a key 'value' that you provide to your customers. You see your associates as extensions of the passion and energy you feel for your business. Your associates know how to help your customers find what they want and need, and quickly. Your associates are also your 'eyes and ears' to know what customers are buying, and what they are looking for.

- A recent report on MSNBC ended by stating that “In the small business, you trust the individual and in the large business you trust the brand.” What they meant by this is that customers tend to look to small businesses when they need help making decisions, and tend to rely on the big box stores when they are familiar with and loyal to brands. If you become an important information source for customers, even when they aren’t specifically searching for information, you will become top of mind when they are making their purchase decisions. They will find a value in your store that goes beyond traditional ‘price value’ that the Big Boxes offer.

So don’t worry about the Big Box stores...concentrate on creating and enhancing customer trust in your business. And for more small business success building ideas visit: <http://www.GrabbingGreen.com/home/about> .

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