

Managing Expectations

This afternoon, I sat in the lobby of my favorite tire dealer, waiting for the crew to mount four new tires on my car. As I waited, I listened to the dealer staff answering the phone.

And in their telephone patter, I heard something that explains why I keep coming back to this dealer, time after time.

Buyers would call on the phone, looking for price quotes. After getting the specifics from the buyer, each salesperson would stop for a moment, and ask the question: "Have you ever bought from us before?"

After getting a response, the salesperson would then explain that what the "out the door" price included, and how their tire company did business.

In under 30 seconds, the customer knew how much the tires would cost, how long it would take to get the tires on the vehicle, what was covered in the price, what the store hours were, and what the customer should expect of the company – mileage guarantees, tire replacement and repair., etc.

I've bought quite a few sets of tires over the years, and before I found these guys (a nationwide chain), I was always frustrated by the bottom line when it came time to pay for the tires. Years ago, suckered into a dealer by a low cost in a tire ad, I would step up to the cash register, only to be confronted by one charge or another. They'd charge for balancing, mounting, valve stems, and for the lack of a "recappable casing." By the time they were done, my inexpensive tires had suddenly grown to be expensive. Moreover, no matter which tire dealer I went to, it always seemed to take them hours to install the tires – especially on those dealers that had what they called "speed lane technology."

My current dealer is better – much better – and I believe the main reason why I think so is that they let you know what to expect, from the first contact to the last wave out the door.

This ability they have developed of "managing expectations" makes for a better experience for the customer, as long as the company follows through.

When a company lets you know what to expect, it becomes easier to make a decision to buy their goods or services.

In the same way, when we open the lines of communication, in order manage the expectations of others – our customers, our family, our bosses, our co-workers – it not only makes them feel better about our contributions, but it also helps us to fulfill those expectations.

My former tire company (also a national chain) would promise fast service, but never deliver. They promised to fix road hazards without quibbling, but when push came to shove, they demanded evidence that we had purchased the tires at their store. But worst of all, they gave a price to you on the phone, and when you got to the cash register, you would find that price was not accurate. Of course, by that time, the tires were already on the car.

Despite what it might look like, this is not a diatribe about tire pricing. This week's piece is all about giving people – customers, co-workers, bosses, family – enough information so they can accurately understand what you are promising, and then delivering what you promise.

Most of us don't give out enough information. We're the tire dealer that says "Oh, sure we can have those tires mounted for you without a problem," but neglects to mention that he's got two hours of work ahead of you. We're the dealer who says "those tires are \$50 each, best in town," but doesn't tell you the price doesn't include mounting, balancing, or road hazard warranty, which inflates the price of the tire to \$85 each, worst in town. We're not actually lying – we're just "under-telling."

Others give out inaccurate information. We're the doctor who schedules you in for an appointment at 10:15 a.m. – and yet at 12:30, you're still not in the office. Deep down, we may know the patient expects the appointment to actually mean something – but we're stacked up, and we really don't care.

Still others outright lie to their customers – they promise something they have no intention of ever delivering, on the theory that if it gets the customer in the door, that's all that matters. Such a customer may buy once – but only once.

When you get right down to it, you know what works best – because you know how you personally like to be treated. You want a company to give you an accurate price, an accurate estimate, and the product they promised to give you.

Now, perhaps it's time for each of us to evaluate our own practices. Do we give out accurate information? Do we keep our customers informed? Do we follow through in the time and manner described? Do we provide enough information to allow our customers to make an informed decision?

My tire dealer has learned that keeping customers informed is a good business decision – and it's certainly worked well for them. It also worked well for me. I was out the door in under a half hour. When I look for tires again, I'll go back, because I know what to expect, and my expectations are always fulfilled.

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