

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

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Let them cry on your shoulder, if they need to. Let them kick and scream, if they want. Stroke them. Help them strategize. Listen. Show compassion.

In today's slow economic times, clients need special care and feeding.

Companies know it's tough to get new customers, so many are taking extra steps to nurture those they already have.

"When you keep more of your customers and keep them happier, that's a cost-cutting strategy. It's expensive to get new customers," said consultant JoAnna Brandi of Boca Raton, who specializes in customer retention and uses the moniker, "The Customer Care Lady."

For export consultant Jaime Sigal, nurturing customers means spending lots of time on the phone, talking with candy and cookie importers in Latin America who face huge obstacles to business: A banking crisis in Argentina. Political strife in Venezuela. Urban violence in Colombia.

Sigal knows many of his conversations won't produce immediate sales, but he says it pays long term to listen.

"They want to talk. You have to show understanding," said Sigal, president of Miami-based export consulting firm **Trexco Inc.**, which specializes in food sales to Latin America. "You can't say, 'But last year, you bought \$1 million from me by this time.' You have to see what you can do to prudently extend credit or other assistance."

That might mean working with clients to produce a smaller package that is more affordable for consumers in strapped economies, he suggested. Sigal said firms that pull back from customers in tough times run the risk their clients may look elsewhere in rosier days.

Candy importers in Latin America, for example, may opt to switch purchases from more expensive U.S. manufacturers to lower cost suppliers from Brazil, Colombia or Mexico.

"If you want to keep that client long term, you have to be proactive," Sigal said.

'PULL OUT ALL THE STOPS'

Market researcher Rick Tobin said his company has become more aggressive with clients active in Latin America, sending in senior staff to help customers fine-tune strategies for slower times.

Among the firm's recommendations: Research that more closely tracks the results of advertising campaigns, so that limited ad funds can be spent more effectively. And more customer-satisfaction surveys, so that businesses can better meet the needs of their existing customers.

"You don't ever want to lose a client, but when economic times are tougher, you want to pull out all the stops, because what you don't get is new clients," said Tobin, president of Miami-based **Strategy Research Corp.**, which specializes in Latin America and U.S. Hispanic markets.

Tobin hopes his aggressive approach can help **Strategy Research** grab market share from other research firms that "may not be as targeted."

For Victoria Goldstein, president of the Latin American division of public relations firm **Brodeur Worldwide**, nurturing clients often means taking over more of

the burden from public relations counterparts at the corporations she serves.

Those corporate executives now are "busier than before" because of staff cutbacks, so Brodeur now "acts more autonomously" to provide them services day-to-day, she said. That might involve designing a new public relations campaign or writing a press release - without immediate input from the corporate executives. That shift requires closer coordination, however, on longer-term planning and evaluation.

"We've always tried to have 'expectations' meetings before we start a project and a "touch-base" meeting every three months," said Goldstein. "But before, things worked pretty much on automatic pilot, and clients would often cancel those meetings."

"Now, with us taking on more tasks directly, it's even more important to meet and review results, expectations and details," she said.

NOT AN EASY ROAD

Still, pressures can build because of today's tough times, making clients more abrasive and nurturing easier said than done.

At Plantation-based **Latpro.com** a job-search site for professionals active in Latin America, an employer recently complained harshly about a job listing inaccurately posted on the Web site by the employer's ad agency, not by staff at Latpro itself.

Eric Shannon, Latpro's president, said he was tempted to "fire back a self-righteous response" blaming the ad agency, but held back - to try to keep good relations with the client.

"We try not to blame. We try to fix the problem. We frequently have to swallow our pride," he said.

Such restraint can boost stress,



Photo/Michael Francis McElroy

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EXPORT CONSULTANT

especially when profits are slim.

Shannon often wonders when he'll see strong returns from years investing time, energy and money in his Internet start-up. It takes work to build up "a higher tolerance after not seeing results," he said.

Indeed, rising levels of stress at companies sometimes backfire into poor service, with recent sur-

veys in the United States documenting growing concerns over rudeness to clients, said Brandi. "The Customer Care Lady" of **JoAnna Brandi & Co. Inc.** in Boca Raton.

"Too many companies are survival-focused, fear-focused, and not customer-focused," Brandi said. "But what's important in tough times is to stay positive and

to keep focused on what matters most to customers, what nourishes customers, what nurtures them, what makes them feel good."

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In tough economic times, it makes more sense to keep customers than to go out and find new ones.

GIVE 'EM WHAT THEY WANT

How to keep customers happy.

- Know customers' expectations.
- Get customer feedback on the consistency and quality of your product or service.
- Train customer-service personnel.
- Under-promise and over-deliver.
- Let customers "opt out" of information they may not want, such as e-mail promotions.
- Encourage employees with a "Great Idea Award" or other incentives.
- Show appreciation to customers, perhaps with thank-you notes or e-mails.

SOURCE: "BUILDING CUSTOMER LOYALTY" BY JOANNA BRANDI



"Exceed your customers' expectations. If you do, they'll come back over and over. Give them what they want - and a little more. Let them know you appreciate them. Make good on all your mistakes, and don't make excuses - apologize. Stand behind everything you do. 'Satisfaction guaranteed' will make all the difference."

Sam Walton (1918-1992)
Wal-Mart founder on building customer loyalty