

Engineering Successful Customer Relationships

CRM



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Building a car is easy. Try building a customer relationship. All right, I'm exaggerating. The truth is building a car is very complex. It is also a collaborative process that begins with market research, is handed over to engineers, and eventually passed on to an assembly plant.

How do you build a lasting customer relationship when consumers have so many choices, vehicles are commodities, and human nature is so fickle?

The first step is to realize that you will need to dedicate more than two months to the effort. Relationship building is a long-haul, multifaceted commitment. Fortunately, customer relationship building is mostly about communication, and communicating with customers is one aspect of your business that is within your control.

Relationship research

The first step toward building customer relationships is to respect your customers' time. Ask their permission. When they make their purchases, let them know that you would like to keep in touch. Remind them you'll only send useful and timely information about new products, special offers, or their service appointments, not bulk emails or robo-calls that will fill up their inbox and interrupt their dinner.

Some customers may prefer email to phone calls, others might prefer text messaging, and still others may like to be notified through every available channel. The important thing is that you enable consumers to decide how they want you to communicate with them. The beauty of this is that consumers who agree to receive messages from a dealership are 2.5 times more likely to buy again from that same dealership.

Relationship design

After securing the customer's permission to communicate with him or her, you'll want to design a communication plan based on the customer's specific preferences: email, voice-mail, mobile, text messaging, or even traditional mail.

With all of the information technology at your fingertips, your dealership can afford to personalize your communication and treat each customer as if he or she is your only customer. Consider providing a personal Web page (PURL) for each customer. These Web pages are branded to your dealership. The customer's car is featured on the Web page and they can even track multiple vehicles' histories. This allows the customer to view recommended service for their vehicle, as well as schedule appointments. You can even insert coupons on the customer's Web page to encourage return visits. More importantly, it reinforces the value you place on the relationship.

Above all, remember to mine and segment your database. Create meaningful lists and automate your contact activities, where appropriate. Your communication action plan should automatically send customers birthday e-cards, anniversary notices, and service appointment reminders.

Relationship assembly

After you engineer your relationship marketing program, you'll need to make sure all the parts fit together and work properly, and that you can drive the message home. Your customer relationship assembly line should include everyone in your dealership, from the person who opens the door to the person who signs the paychecks.

Remember to stay involved with your community and let your customers know. Sponsor a community event and invite your customers to it. You could also make a donation to a local charity, fund a scholarship, or donate time to a cause. The important thing is: Don't be afraid to talk about it. Remember, you are a vital part of the local community.

Building customer relationships

Just as a car isn't created out of thin air, a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship doesn't occur on its own. Building a durable customer relationship is the result of a well engineered communication action plan that respects both buyer and seller while making the most out of data and technology.

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