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# SERVICE: PERSONAL TOUCH

CONSUMERS ARE INCREASINGLY TURNING TO BUSINESSES THAT OFFER A ONE-ON-ONE EXPERIENCE, CREATING A NEW WAVE OF COMPANIES PRACTICING SERVICE WITH A SMILE

Many corporations have traditionally outsourced service operations in the name of efficiency. But this type of assistance is fast becoming counterproductive as it does not take the human factor into account. The consumer backlash against impersonal customer service has created new opportunities for smaller businesses that — thanks to their size — are in the perfect position to capitalize on customer demand for a more personal and human experience.

Many consumers have experienced misunderstandings with overseas call centers or struggled through automated systems that shift the workload away from the business and back to them. Computers have undoubtedly quickened once-laborious tasks and processes, but their increased efficiencies come with a downside. Because automated systems allow companies to employ fewer staff, customers are often left to compensate. Many are now used to installing complicated electronic goods on their own, much as they are accustomed to wandering through large department stores unassisted — leaving an entrée for savvy business owners to bridge the gap.

## — *Offer Something Extra*

Not surprisingly, the decline in the customer “experience” has coincided with higher expectations from consumers. It is important to stand out in a crowded market — especially in one like today’s — so offering something extra that demonstrates care, thought and attention will resonate.

Brick-and-mortar businesses have been among the first to incorporate the personal touch into their customer service approach but increasingly, online start-ups are coming to understand the value customers place on good service, too. Washington D.C., entrepreneur Kassie Rempel was so inspired by the poor service she encountered while shopping on the internet that she opened the online shoe boutique Simply Soles ([www.simplysoles.com](http://www.simplysoles.com)). Her shop offers a toll-free number where customers can talk to real people (including Rempel herself), and makes it easy for customers to try shoes on at home with a hassle-free return policy. Rempel and her staff send as many as 200 handwritten thank-you notes a day — a small commitment that earns big in terms of customer loyalty



and repeat business. Net a Porter ([www.net-a-porter.com](http://www.net-a-porter.com)) customers browse a website designed in the style of a fashion magazine. Each purchase arrives in a glossy shopping bag ensuring that customers enjoy a boutique experience without leaving home.

Inspiration doesn't have to come from innovation – in fact, a touch of nostalgia can be just what customers are looking for. The Manhattan Milk Company in New York responded to consumer demand for local, quality goods by reintroducing the old-fashioned service of dairy on demand. Delivering organic, antibiotic-free milk in recyclable glass bottles directly to customers' doors, the company completes its brand image by collecting and recycling used bottles free of charge.

#### — *Pay Attention to Detail*

There are many ways a business owner can demonstrate the personal touch: offering complimentary beverages requires minimal outlay but creates a great lasting impression; hosting special shopping evenings engenders a social environment that puts the customer at ease. Post-purchase, following

up with customers by a quick phone call pays dividends, as does a customer-friendly refund policy or follow-up visit. Because these extras are low-cost (or free), they offer immediate opportunities for a small business to create a personality and garner a loyal following with little or no additional investment.

#### — *Ensure Accessibility*

Companies that can't show a physical demonstration to customer commitment, such as telephone- and internet-only service-driven businesses, can still employ the personal touch by being accessible to their customers. A little investment – like a well-trained staff member at the end of a phone line – can go a long way in customer retention and word of mouth. Because small businesses are closer to their customers than large-scale operations, they are well-positioned to offer this personal touch. The key to providing it effectively is to be authentic. Delivering what consumers crave – acknowledgment, convenience and attention to detail – will ensure that your business is top of mind when a customer thinks about where to turn for service.