

## Attracting Customers Is Easy; Keeping Them Is The Hard Part

By Bob Devaney

**T**here are lots of creative ways to win new customers. One of the best methods is to make people an offer they can't refuse. Will \$10 of free drycleaning get them in? If that does not work, how about \$15 or \$20 off of an order? If you are creative and offer customers enough incentive, they will come. But that's the easy part. The hard part is to keep the people coming back. This is the secret that differentiates the highly successful cleaner from the one who is barely making it.

**Why customers visit.** Start by understanding why customers might come to your store in the first place. Then, determine what actually makes them want to come back even when they don't have a \$10 coupon in their hands. There are many reasons why customers may choose your store over a competitor's.

A convenient location is important. You can't do a lot about an existing location, but when choosing a new site, one of the most important factors is convenience. Consider the following. Look for plazas that are service-oriented and have plenty of parking spaces. Good neighbor tenants include coffee shops, convenience stores, hairdressers and nail salons.

A store located on the morning – or AM – side of the street is ideal, because this is the direction most people drive on the way to work in the morning.

The best location within the plaza is typically an end spot with a drive-through or the possibility of adding a drive-through. Generally, the closer to the end, the better. Also, look for a spot that is located next to the most popular tenants. For example, it's better to be next to the coffee shop

than the florist. Coffee shops and convenience stores cater to the same AM customer that you do.

Close parking is another convenience factor. You don't want your customers to have to walk too far. We usually negotiate a few spots that will be labeled "parking for drycleaner only" or "five-minute parking."

Perception is extremely important to potential and existing customers. If you don't look like a successful professional drycleaner, you will lose market share. Make sure your store is clean – inside and out. All signs in the store should be professionally created. Also, make sure that all of your personnel are neat and well trained.

**Keep them coming back.** I think of coupons as bait. Coupons are not designed for customer retention; they are simply an incentive to try your service. If a coupon is successful, it gets the customer in the door. It is then your job to keep them coming back. The following steps can help you achieve this.

Successfully retaining your customers is a slow but sure process. Once you successfully build a loyal customer base – one that is not based on coupons or gimmicks – your business will actually begin to grow by itself through word of mouth. Your outstanding customer service, quality and retention marketing will make it very hard for any competitor to take away your customers.

**Word of mouth.** What is the first thing you do after you have experienced an exceptional dinner or excellent customer service? You tell someone. That is because it is rare to get more than you expected – to be wowed.

You are the one who spreads the news. And, because you are telling and not selling, the news becomes

truthful and, therefore, effective. Almost every drycleaner will advertise that they are the best at what they do, so who do you believe? You will believe a friend more than the drycleaner because the friend has nothing to gain from the recommendation. This is why word of mouth advertising is the most important and effective way to build your business.

**Great customer service:** Customer service is much more than a thank you and a smile. Customers want a mature, knowledgeable and friendly customer service representative (CSR). A good CSR should not be a high school kid who does not know the difference between a coat and a jacket, or a dress and a gown. A well-trained CSR cares about your business and should be given ample training and attention.

CSRs should be knowledgeable about all of the various procedures that your store offers, have a working knowledge of fabrics and have exemplary computer skills. They need to know how to think on their feet and handle a myriad of situations calmly and professionally.

The person you hire should care about the business as much as the owner does. A CSR's attitude should always be upbeat and friendly. I once made buttons for CSRs that simply said, "YES! I'll do that for you." That should be the attitude of every CSR.

**Great quality.** It should go without saying, but despite the difficulty to achieve it, consistently high quality is absolutely necessary. I used to think that I provided the highest level of quality until I put an end-of-the-line inspector to critique every finished garment. The inspector took items that I thought were ready to go and discovered untold errors – from excess lint and broken buttons, to fall-

ing hems, stains and bad pressing. I was shocked by how poor quality it actually was.

The secret to good inspection is having someone that truly cares and who will not be intimidated by the other workers. They need to be fussier than your fussiest customer, and nothing should get by them. I consider this the most important step, because if you do it right, then your quality can never be topped.

**Preparing the order.** Try to think like a customer. The goal is to try to give your customers their clothes in a ready-to-wear state. Unless you are using heat-sealing technology for garment tags, then you need to remove all tickets or tags from your customers' clothes prior to packaging. This will be greatly appreciated by your customer and may set you apart from your competition.

Take the tickets off each item and then staple them to the invoice, which you should retrieve when the customer picks up their order. If you ever have an issue, you can go back to the invoice and find out which items went with that particular order. Also, button every button and zip up every zipper. Not only does this look professional, but it will also help you discover broken buttons and zippers.

**Packaging.** This is where your concern for the environment can really set you apart from most cleaners. Plastic is not environmentally friendly. Give your customers a choice of reusable bags or biodegradable plastic.

Also, give them the option of reducing the overall packaging that you normally provide. For example, I suggest limiting bags to three or fewer similar items, individually bagging suits and dresses, and placing shoulder guards on suits.

If your customer requests minimal packaging, then you can cut out the stuffing and shoulder guards and place more items in one bag. This request will be the exception, not the rule. The point is to give your customers what they want and even exceed their expectations.

**Pricing.** According to surveys, price is not customers' top priority. However, you should have a pricing strategy and always be aware of your competitors' prices and services so that you can compare apples to apples. If you are providing great customer service and the best possible quality, then you should be getting the highest possible price.

Pricing should be based on your service, quality and location. If your location is not as good as competitors',



*Drycleaner Bob Devaney owns The Cleaner Spot.*

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you should be priced a little lower for the inconvenience. I like to be about a nickel below the highest comparable cleaner in the area. If a customer asks why your prices are higher, let them know that it's because you offer the best value in the area. Tell them that your customers are extremely fussy and want the best possible quality and service.

**Loyalty.** Great service and quality will instill confidence and trust with your customers, which will result in loyalty. A loyal customer is not coupon-motivated and will even defend you to others. A loyal customer will not easily switch to a competitor, because they are satisfied and comfortable with you.

The following inexpensive retention incentives can result in customer loyalty:

- VIP bags,
- automatic rewards,
- welcome letters,
- letters to big clients who have left, and
- e-mail marketing.

You can retain customers and create loyalty by making a new customer welcome kit. Buy some small retail shopping bags and put a VIP bag with an extra large luggage tag in it. The extra large luggage tag will hold the customer preferences and an automatic rewards card. The automatic rewards card is similar to what sandwich shops offer – free sandwiches after a certain number of purchases. When the card is full, the customer gets 50% off his next order.

Also, place a personalized welcome letter in the bag, informing the customer of your services and specialties, and a percentage off his second visit. This gets him in a third and fourth time, which will help to break his previous habits and get him used to coming to you.

Monitor your customers closely and contact them if they change their habits or stop coming. Most point-of-sale systems will do this for you. When you contact your lost customers, find out why they stopped coming and offer them an incentive to come back. If a letter doesn't do the trick, then get on the phone and call them. This is aggressive, but it works.

Finally, the most cost-effective way to keep in contact with your customers is e-mail marketing. For less than \$20 a week, you can send 5,000 personalized, colorful e-mails to your customers. And, because your customers requested to join the program, you will get a very high open rate. You can easily build your list by simply asking your customers to sign up right at your front counter. **DCN**

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