

Customer Service

Part of a How-To Guide for Successful Agritourism Enterprises

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Okay. You have a wonderful product. Your operation is streamlined. You have been successful in your advertising and promotion. People are discovering what you have to offer and have started patronizing you. Now, how do you get them to come back again and, hopefully, tell others what a wonderful product or experience you provided? You want to keep your customers happy and appreciated. Your goal is to make each customer feel as if he or she is the most important customer you have and to exceed their expectations.

Customer Service encompasses so many things that it is impossible to list them all here. It can be seen in the appearance of your operation, the initial reception your customer receives, and the knowledge and attitude of you and your employees. In addition, the accuracy of directions and ease of accessibility are also a part of customer service.

So what is customer service? Customer service means that your customer is always right, even if he's wrong! There is a solution to almost every problem. It's up to you to find it.

**There will be the very rare customer who you will never be able to satisfy. If you encounter one of these, do the very best you can, and then turn your attention to your other customers. Chances are, anyone who knows him will understand he is, most always, difficult and will pay little attention to his appraisal of your operation.*

When you satisfy a customer, he will, on average, tell four or five others what a wonderful experience he had or how much he likes your product. He is also more likely to return.

A dissatisfied customer will tell *seven to thirteen* people about his bad experience. You'll probably never see him again and you may never have an opportunity to create customers out of those to which he complained. As you can see, the type customer that *you create* can directly affect your success and your profits.

In order to keep your current customer base satisfied and attract new customers you need to develop a plan. You want to know if your customers are completely happy with you. But more importantly, you want to know in what ways you fell short of their expectations. You need to determine what it will take to satisfy your customers, and then find out how successful you were in actually satisfying them. If you fall short of full satisfaction, you need to know how to correct the problem as soon as possible.

Written Customer Plan

Before you develop a written customer service plan, you want to identify your target customer. You want to use the old question series: "who, what, when, where, why, how and will".

Who are your customers?

Are they local, national or international? Do you want to attract a specific exclusive clientele or will you welcome any and all business? Does your pricing or activity target or eliminate a

specific group? Will any of your customers have special needs? Will you cater to children, the handicapped or the elderly?

What will your target customer want and expect to receive from you?

Will they want to be catered to? Will they want or need individualized attention? What types of facility or product do they want?

When will they come to your agritourism business? Is it daily or seasonal? Will you have set hours or will they vary? Will there be overnight stays?

Where are they coming from? Are your customers local, regional or national? Where are you located? Do you have realistic expectations that you will be patronized?

Why would they want to patronize you? Do you offer something that they haven't experienced? Is your product exclusive or in high demand?

How can they find you? Are you listed in the phone book? Do you run ads that include directions? Do you have adequate signage or directions? Are they able to reach you by phone regarding questions they may have? You will be amazed at the number of businesses who advertise, yet never include an address, phone number or directions.

Will your customers have any special needs, supervision or individual assistance?

Will you have patrons who are Handicapped or elderly? Will you host groups or families with small children? Do you have adequate staff and accommodations to address these needs?

Once you can answer all of the above, and more, you will be able to write your Customer Service plan. Your plan will serve as a blueprint to address each of these questions, and many more, to guide you in providing quality service to your customers. Your plan should outline specific actions you can take to ensure that you meet and exceed all of your customers needs. Write it as you did your initial business plan.

1. Assess your physical facility. Be sure it is spotlessly clean and inviting. It should make one feel welcome. You want your customer's first impression to be positive. If it is not, they may likely fail to notice anything else you have to offer. Create a plan that will ensure all areas are monitored daily, or hourly if needed, and meet or exceed established standards.. Ensure that you have adequate accommodations and staff to provide assistance for children, handicapped and elderly customers. Identify ways in which this will be accomplished.

2. Examine your advertising. Be certain that it portrays an accurate description of what you have to offer and what your customer will experience.

3. Ensure that you can be easily reached. If you cannot answer the phone yourself, determine a solution to how your customer can reach you without becoming agitated.

4. Establish an employee policy. Clearly define your business practices and expectations. Address issues such as attitude, clothing attire, courtesy and knowledge. . Develop a training program so your employees will understand and are able to comply with what is expected. Help them learn how to anticipate and avoid problem situations. Identify plans for your employees to follow in handling complaints, irate customers or emergency situations.

5. Create a method to determine the number of staff needed to conduct your business. Determine how you will be able to adjust your hiring in relation to fluctuations in demand

6. Determine several methods your customers and employees can use to evaluate your business. In addition to overall satisfaction, create evaluations that rate specific areas. Target specific things such as friendliness, wait times, phone response, purchasing experience, accessibility and the ease of locating your business.

Offer a means for both customers and employees to tell you what they didn't like or found lacking in your operation. Ask for suggestions to help you improve. Also, consider having friends or family become your customer. Have them truthfully rate every aspect of your business. Ask them to be brutal in their assessments. Assure them that this is an exercise to help you make your business the best it can be. Use their criticism as a guide to fine-tune your operation.

7. Visit your competition. Objectively compare their operation to yours. Look for mistakes to avoid, but also look for the areas in which they shine. Determine what they have that you want to emulate and include this in your plan.

8. Establish your business's policy regarding payments, returns and refunds. Display your policy and ensure that your customers are aware of and understand it.

Look at the businesses you really like to patronize. Why do you like them? If you can identify the things that keep you coming back, you already have an example to follow. The ideas presented here just barely touch the surface in helping you to identify and establish good customer service. Hopefully, they will give you some initial guidance and inspiration in developing a plan specifically tailored to your agritourism business that will help you to succeed..