

SMALL BUSINESS INNOVATION: **PRODUCTIVITY**

Play that tune

For small retailers, service is king

Bourbon Street Boutique in Castlegar is an oasis of comfortable elegance in the West Kooteney region of British Columbia: soft jazz music plays inside and outside the store, lemony yellow walls are illuminated by a sparkling chandelier and faux wrought iron trims the exterior in true New Orleans style. But according to small business expert and coach Roy Prevost, owner Karen LeMoel offers her clientele much more than high-end fashion and ambiance.

"When I began coaching Karen," says Mr. Prevost, "we first worked at focusing on her niche of the market and elevating her level of service there. One of the things that is critically important to any small business trying to survive in a Big Box world is the 80/20 rule as it applies to customers. In Karen's business, she's come to understand that not everyone is her potential customer. Twenty per cent of her clients do 80 per cent of her business, and about 20 per cent of all potential clients will be interested in what she does. That's where she now focuses her energy."

Ms. LeMoel hasn't always worked with a business coach. (Today she has two and also considers her friends, family, clientele and business associates part of her advisory team.) "When I bought this business nine years ago, I thought I'd



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Karen LeMoel, owner of Castlegar, B.C.'s, fashionable Bourbon Street Boutique, has carefully tailored her store's ambiance to distinguish her business from her competitors and attract a discerning clientele. Rather than try to please everyone, Ms. LeMoel also focuses intently on serving the interests of those customers who account for the majority of her business.

also keeps her clients in mind when she goes on buying trips. "I want women to wear and enjoy the clothes I sell them - I don't want to sell something that is going to sit in the closet. We don't do trends."

Understanding customer needs also allows her to keep her inventory costs in line. "I now stick to a budget when I'm purchasing inventory. If I bought just for me, I'd be in a lot of trouble. I bring a copy of my customer's wish lists for next season when I go to trade shows. When something comes in, I give them a call to say, 'There is something here I chose for you - I think you might like it.'"

If the boutique doesn't have what a customer is looking for, says Mr. Prevost, Ms. LeMoel will do her best to find it through her suppliers or even other retailers.

As a result of this extraordinary level of service, the boutique has also developed many mail order customers, many of whom have never been in the store. Web (bourbonstreet.ca) and mail order clients receive a complimentary half-hour telephone style analysis with Ms. LeMoel, who then puts together a package and mails it. Anything that isn't deemed perfect can be returned, but so far, the only 'returns' have been positive ones - word-of-mouth recommendations from delighted clients. ■

Know your customer

For small business, says coach Roy Prevost, success depends on knowing the customer. "Not only do they have to know the customer by name, but it is helpful to know birth dates, preferences, lifestyle, how often and how much they buy, and their anniversary date."

A Client Relationship Management system also allows business owners to understand who their "top 20 per cent are. Then they can provide them with perks and reasons to come back more often," he says.

It's equally important to remember the simple, personal touches. "There are two things you have to remember: say thank you to people who do business with you. And invite people who don't to become customers. It's as easy as 'Why don't you come and do business with me? I'd love to have you as a customer.'"

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just get in there and do what needed to be done and everything would work out. It took me six years to realize I couldn't do it alone - since then, I've learned to identify and work within my core strengths. It takes more than one person to get everything right."

Although Ms. LeMoel sells women's clothing and accessories, her growing success rests not on product but on service. "(Our clientele) is like another family. Most of the people who come in for the first time ask for me because they've been referred by someone else who shops here. It's a wonderful relationship - soon they become more than customers, they become really great friends."

Knowing her clients as well as she does allows Ms. LeMoel to do more than recommend enticing items in her store - she

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Analyze this

Looking to improve your customer service? Begin with a self-analysis.

Small business coach Roy Prevost says, "Attitude is everything. If you're not a people person, hire someone who is, treat them right and keep them around. Secondly, you have to have a passion for what you are doing, because that translates all through your business. You can have the most beautiful store in the country, but if you don't have these attributes, the rest won't matter."

In a world with so many choices available, the service level in a small business has to be significantly different than a large store, says Mr. Prevost. "Small business lends itself to a more personal connection to the customer, and the secret to small businesses surviving and thriving is nurturing that connection. It may be a phone call, a post card, a personal e-mail - simply saying, 'I haven't seen you in a while. How are you doing?'"

The objective is building a relationship. "It's something that will entice the customer to say, 'These people give me such great service. They are wonderfully warm, nice people.'"