

## **First Impressions Make The Difference**

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We all know in this very tight market, customers are no longer like buses, with another one coming along every 10 minutes. That is why when a customer does approach a business, they get more attention than a porn star visiting the troops in Baghdad. Yeah, right!

I recently mystery shopped four small businesses. In every case I was the only customer on the premises at the time.

At one business, I walked up to what looked like the front entrance only to see a sign on the door telling me to use the front entrance. Unfortunately, it did not tell me where the front entrance was. I finally found it around the side of the building. When I walked in, I found myself in the same room I would have been in had I gone through what I thought was the front door. Moreover, I could see no reason why that door could not have been used.

At another business, I was greeted by a front door with cracked glass and two handwritten signs, with very poor hand writing I might add, instructing me to do various things like shut the door behind me. It was like being back home with Mum! Then I had to walk through a show room that looked like a building site, climb some narrow stairs that led to the administration office, which unfortunately for me was empty and stand around until someone emerged from an adjoining room.

Another business, a small manufacturer, was located on a very busy road with fast moving traffic and due to poor signage was very hard to find. If I had not been determined to go there, I would have given up and gone somewhere else. Once I found the place, it was difficult to find a park. When I entered the business, a very shy receptionist appeared reluctant to talk to me and showed none of the enthusiasm, warmth and friendliness I would think a customer would get in these tough times. Eventually she fetched someone who turned out to be the factory manager. In the previous two businesses, nobody tries to sell their company to me. I had to explain my needs without being prompted and then ask questions about what they could do for me. Often they did not listen to what I was saying. His man at least did try to sell his company but his conversation all about the equipment they have in the factory.

At the fourth business, I walked into a bright, upmarket showroom and stood around for a few minutes while the receptionist had a personal conversation on the telephone. Finally, a chap, who turned out to be the managing director, came out of his office to talk to me. I gave my name and introduced myself to him but he did not feel the need to do the same. He was, however, the only person I visited who invited me to sit down. Not surprisingly, I spent four times longer in that business than in the others, which gave me a chance to tell him more about my needs and to learn more about what the company had to offer. It felt like a relaxed conversation rather than a business enquiry. Had I been

serious about buying and not just mystery shopping, I would have spent at least twice as much with this company as a result.

But here is the really scary bit. In three of the four businesses I visited, I was not asked for my name and contact details before I left! In a market where customer enquiries are as rare as sightings of Kiwi birds at noon on Main Street, how could anyone possibly allow a prospect to escape without getting the information they need to be able to follow up?

This mystery shopping experience reminded me just how important first impressions are. Here are five steps to creating a great first impression.

**1. Make it easy for your customers to get to you.**

Your signage needs to stand out and if you are in a complex of buildings, it needs to be very clear which is yours. Make sure there is adequate parking set aside for customers which is also clearly marked. Finally, make the entrance easy to find!

**2. Look sharp**

According to one study, 92% of people said the appearance of the building and the staff influenced their perception of the experience they were about to get. If you want people to think you are professional, upmarket or just plain competent, make sure the look of your building, vehicles and staff sends that message.

**3. Be welcoming**

Teach your staff that when customers come in it is like having a guest walk in their home. That means taking the first step, reaching out to the customer, with a warm, friendly smile, introducing yourself by name, where appropriate shaking hands and having enthusiasm in your voice. After all, this could be someone who helps pay their wages and contributes to your profits.

**4. Sell yourself**

The customer has come to your business for one reason only and that is to be sold something. Do not make them do all the work by having to ask a lot of questions. Learn to ask open-ended questions and to listen to what they have to say. Then identify the critical factors for them and demonstrate that you can deliver on those. Tell stories, cite examples of work done and show pictures. Even better would be to have testimonials from happy customers and former customers happy to give you a reference. Remember to sell benefits not features. Features are what you do. Benefits are what they get that matters to them because you do what you do.

**5. Follow up**

Finally, and most importantly, follow up the visit. You cannot do this unless you have the customer's name and contact details. Do not be afraid to call because you might be rejected. The call shows you care and are professional. It might just tip the balance in your favour. Even if it does not, there is always

a next time, or something might go wrong and the customer needs to shop around again, or they may just pass your name on to someone else.

First impressions are so important and we all know that you have only one opportunity to make a first impression. It is worth working hard to get it right. Especially these days.