



Customer Service Basics for Agricultural Entrepreneurs

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Introduction

Viable commercial enterprises – from the small rural retailer to the global wholesale distributor – require both a seller and a buyer. To hold onto, or expand their customer base, businesses must prioritize this buyer-seller relationship, maintaining a reputation of dedicated client support.

Oklahoma State University Extension has long offered training materials and workshops dedicated to teaching basic customer service skills to frontline employees (AGEC-1081). In this context, frontline employees are those that directly interact with customers. It is important to note that in an agricultural enterprise the frontline employee may also be the owner operator. This fact sheet contributes further by equipping “agricultural entrepreneurs” – agricultural producers who sell their products in a farmers market or direct-to-consumer setting – with the knowledge to build and maintain lasting relationships between themselves and their customers.

What is Customer Service?

Customer service is defined as how an organization interacts with customers before, during and after a sale. For a traditional brick-and-mortar business, it is evident when the customer service process takes place as the interaction typically starts when the customer walks through the business's doors. Customer service happens anytime a client visits the business, places a call or visits the website/social media page. For a traditional brick-and-mortar business, the majority of customer service involves in-personal interactions or on the business site. For agricultural producers, the customer service process can be more challenging because so much of the process happens remotely.

Customer Service Basics

As mentioned in the previous OSU Extension Fact Sheet (AGEC-1081), taking care to ensure the firm's frontline employees are portraying the image and attitude that paints the business in a positive light is the key to customer service. Training workers on customer interaction, including answering the phone and helping with customer dissatisfaction, are often underutilized tactics to ensure employee actions are aligned with company goals and quality standards. Because little things can make a big difference, it is essential that customer-facing employees do not overlook the small details that can greatly improve the shopping experience.

Customer Service in the Ag Industry

Because of the limited in-person interaction many agricultural producers have with their clientele, it is crucial to treat every customer interaction with care. This section contains customer service recommendations that are uniquely oriented toward agricultural producers, including (but not limited to) agritourism firms, direct-to-consumer sales and farmers market vendors.

First, take every opportunity to make a positive impression on all potential customers you encounter. Brick-and-mortar businesses have the advantage of a physical location with signage, branding and frequent foot and automobile traffic. As such, customers already have an idea of the role those businesses play in their community. While some agricultural producers may have a brick-and-mortar store front, others may not have that advantage. This can lead to producers having limited opportunities to create their “brand” while at farmers markets, on the phone or interacting face-to-face in the community. Because of this, opportunities for interaction must be carefully executed, ensuring that every impression contributes toward building a positive reputation for quality service.

If you have a website, ensure it is well functioning and has up-to-date information. Your website is typically the first (and perhaps last) opportunity that potential customers will use to gauge your company. Ensure that there is always contact information for your company because quick and efficient communication can help keep the customer's business if they have problems with ordering on the website. Pictures of your operation and the employees can also make customers feel more connected to your operation. There are many more guidelines to best practices when designing a website, one article outlining such information can be found here: 10 Principles of Good Web Design (<https://www.smashingmagazine.com/2008/01/10-principles-of-effective-web-design/>).

When customers come to a business, they want to buy two things: good feelings and solutions to problems. In the case of a direct-to-consumer beef producer, beef is the solution to a customer's problem of obtaining food. Whether they are buying direct-to-consumer because they like the quality of the beef, like the producers message, or are simply choosing the cheapest and easiest way to get the quantity needed, that rancher is offering a solution. When quality solutions are offered, customers are willing to pay

a premium. A successful business is centered around and grounded in problem-solving.

Ensure you get clear and usable feedback on business practices. Identifying customer complaints and areas that a firm can improve are essential to the long-term viability of any small business. Agriculture producers often find it difficult to get feedback, especially since they do not often have traditional business models. Comment and suggestion boxes at in-person locations and surveys for feedback are all helpful tools to help create an honest dialogue between a customer and the owner/manager. Below is a link that gives suggestions on ways to get feedback: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinesscouncil/2022/05/31/three-ways-small-businesses-can-obtain-customer-feedback-for-long-term-success>

Knowing a business's community is necessary for the long-term success of agricultural operations. Customers' values should be reflected in the business's products and services. This looks different in every community. If the community places high importance on locally grown food, an agritourism firm could offer fruits and vegetables grown nearby. Community needs can also change the way a firm advertises. In a small town, knowing the community could mean advertising by joining the local chamber of commerce, sponsoring the hometown tee-ball team or participating in community festivals.

In the agricultural industry, it is essential to know your product inside and out. When selling to customers, remember they may not be familiar with your product. For a direct-to-consumer meat operation, this can mean being able to explain the differences in cuts of meat in an easy-to-understand manner. Some customers will not know the difference between a

top sirloin and a flank steak. Explaining the taste, quality or preparation of a cut could be the difference between a life-long customer and a missed sale. Some operations include recipe cards with less familiar cuts of meat to provide support to customers and increase sales. For a vendor at a farmers market, explaining how to pick out the best watermelons or what to look for when examining squash can help establish credibility with a buyer. Knowing the cultural significance of a product can also help improve customer service. If a business specializes in meat products for a religious group, knowing the rules and regulations surrounding raising and slaughtering can help set an operation apart from competitors.

Presentation and safety in a business are key. This is especially important for agritourism firms or companies that have customers visit their operations. Ensure any customer facilities (bathrooms, kitchens, parking areas) meet health and safety codes. Cleanliness is also essential. If bathroom facilities are a portable bathroom that is cleaned once a summer, it may be good to reevaluate the image that is being given to customers. While the cost of additional cleaning, upgrading existing facilities or even significant capital improvements like the addition of electricity or running water to a shop building may seem high, it will pay dividends in increasing the consumer experience and may be required by law.

Conclusion

Customer service is essential to agricultural producers looking to grow or maintain their customer base. Frontline employees (those that interact with a customer) can make or break a business. Whichever sector of agriculture you are in, from agritourism to production, you can make every customer interaction count.

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