



Strategies to Strengthen Relationships With Major Account Customers

Relationships - whether personal relationships with family and friends or business relationships with client accounts or consumers - require constant tending. They require ongoing development through mutual experiences that go beyond the occasional visit. The 'client call' - or 'family visit' - should be a culmination of previous non-face-to-face interactions and communications.

We're advised to develop relationships with our major customers. Wise words. But what does that mean exactly? There are all types of 'relationship' terms to confuse things - strategic relationships, long-term relationships, relationship selling, relationship buying, relationship building, and so on.

What does this mean for a business whose customers are at the end of a long channel of intermediary sellers? How do they manage the 'faceless' end customer? Or, how can companies develop relationships when customers number in the thousands, when the product doesn't require direct contact, service or assistance, or when overheads are so high the company can't lift another finger for customers?

The challenge is universal - to build healthy relationships, no matter what is sold or who the buyer is. Good customer relationships don't just happen. They evolve through effort, planning, and action. The term, "account management," while usually associated with a B-to-B context, must take on universal appeal for both consumers and business customers.

So let's consider two basic elements of account management that are universally applicable and will contribute to the development of more positive and profitable customer relationships.

Whether we like it or not, **chemistry** can encourage or discourage further business engagements. When we like a person, we want to do business with them. When there's 'bad' chemistry, it makes subsequent interactions difficult, if not impossible. In an ideal world, you could simply replace one account manager with another who works better with your customer. In a B-to-B scenario, when it's not always possible to replace your primary contact on the account, you can provide multiple contact people from within your organisation to work with your client company, drawing on the power of your company's good chemistry.

By supplementing the account with other skills and personality sets, perhaps you can get around any personal chemistry issue. Leveraging your company chemistry is also a good strategy for businesses unable to reach every customer on a one-to-one level. Customers want to buy from companies they like, where there is an



attraction and feeling of being a "match." How can you build chemistry between a company that is inanimate and a disparate group of customers? Can a company have a personality? Well yes - effective branding can give a company a personality. But in today's computerised world where technology is dehumanising a lot of business, there is a growing number of customers who are looking for improved "quality of human contact" in business. They don't want to do business with a company or a brand, they want to do business with human beings who they trust, respect and LIKE!

In addition to the personalised contact, companies can develop a personality which can lead to improved customer "chemistry" in a number of ways including - forums on the web site, newsletters, loyalty programs, clubs, information seminars, sponsorships, promotions, PR campaigns, corporate boxes at major events etc...

In both personal and business situations, a **willingness to invest in the relationship** is probably the most significant sign that there is the desire to maintain a lasting partner relationship.

Typically, companies can provide additional services, but what other investments can signify added value to your customers and (some) 'cost' to you?

What about placing additional resources onto a project or an account in a B-to-B scenario or waiving delivery fees for the regular consumer customer? Can you provide a service that will help your account customer add value at any step in their "internal value chain"? Can you be more proactive and continually involve the customer in a diagnosis of their needs, present and future, and offer unique, customised solutions? This is better than just flogging your products.

Building customised knowledge about your customer by maintaining an accurate and up to date database allowing you to forecast inventory needs, shows an investment in the customer relationship. Having a written strategic account plan for each major customer demonstrates that you have invested time and effort in being effective as well as efficient.

Tracking all communication using ACT or other CRM systems in complex accounts shows that you have invested in coordinating communication flow in the relationship. Forecast and prediction also can lead to joint long-range planning, where both you and the customer plan together to achieve mutual benefits of production and usage.

This all sounds pretty logical and basic to any business, doesn't it? And yet, how many companies do you work with where you would say you have a strong (or any) relationship?



Companies should stop making excuses about the difficulties of building relationships and simply take the lead in managing the relationship. Start with these two basic elements of account management and adapt them to your own business situation. Use them as a guide to yearly planning for individual customer accounts or unique customer segments. As customers, we look for evidence of things that are important. So, what can you do to get the chemistry right? What have you invested in the relationship, and more importantly does the customer perceive that you have made an effort to do so?



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