

## Marketing to Enhance Farm Viability



# Excelling in Customer Service

As a couple got out of their car one Thursday morning at the North Hadley Sugar Shack, Martha Boisvert called out, “Hey, you look good!” and gave them each a warm hug. Martha’s warmth and sincerity with each customer are the keys to her success. With big box stores competing for every aspect of consumers’ purchases, differentiating yourself is crucial. One great way to outdo big stores is through excellent customer service. The following steps will help you create a shopping experience that customers remember, tell their friends about, and that will keep them coming back for more.

## STEP 1 BE REAL AND BE HONEST

When people are treated with respect and given accurate information, they reciprocate with trust. Bruce Baker, a farm market consultant, says you should “never rock the B.S. meter.” Phoniness is an immediate turnoff. Conversely, if people see their shopping experience as educational and truthful, they will be more willing to support your business.

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You can take this a step further by freely giving out good information. At Annie’s Garden Store, we offer weekly, free gardening workshops. We also give out free “garden guides”, one-page information sheets on various gardening topics. People trust our advice because we approach gardening from an educational, ecological point of view, not just as a business venture. You can give out recipe cards for underused vegetables, print care cards for natural fiber clothing, or have signage about what makes locally grown produce better tasting and healthier. Whatever you do, tell the truth about the product and help your customer enjoy and take care of it.



## STEP 2 PUT THE SERVE BACK IN CUSTOMER SERVICE

When you’re selling, the whole interaction is about the customer, not the salesperson. To quote Bruce Baker again, “Business is about ‘Yes’ and ‘You’.” People don’t want to hear how hectic your day has been or about another crop failure. They want to hear “Yes, I can help you meet your needs.” Always keep a positive attitude when on the sales floor; carry parcels to cars; hold open doors; and offer shopping baskets or bags so people can empty their hands. Put out umbrellas for rainy days; serve hot cider or tea on cold weekends, and take special orders or call customers when their favorite products are available. Many of Martha Boisvert’s customers are older. They are important to her business because they spend more money on larger quantities of produce. Physically helping them choose and load their merchandise is an absolute requirement of everyone who works at the Sugar Shack.

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## STEP 3 CREATE A CUSTOMER SERVICE POLICY

Articulate your customer service policy to your employees. It sets the standard for all your staff to follow. It also ensures that customers are created equally by all staff. If the owner is the only one giving excellent service, customers



will gravitate towards him or her and the owner will never get anything else done! At the beginning of every maple sugaring season, the Hadley Sugar Shack holds an all-staff meeting. At this meeting, Martha spells out her expectations for customer service for the coming busy season.

### Some of our customer service policies at Annie's Garden Store include:

- ❖ Never allow more than one customer to wait in line before getting back up help.
- ❖ Answer the phone politely and put the person on hold while getting the answer to their call.
- ❖ Hold unpaid merchandise for customers for up to one week.

*These policies will vary from business to business.*

By writing them down, it not only allows you to cement them in your mind, but it also makes them clear for anyone helping you with your farm or retail enterprise.

## STEP 4 CREATE A UNIQUE SHOPPING EXPERIENCE

Pets, display gardens, food tastings, free samples, and entertainment all set your business out as unique and fun. These free perks encourage loyalty. They are also great diversions on a busy day when people may not be able to get immediate sales help.

You will enable a good shopping experience when you greet and make eye contact with every customer. This opens the lines of communication and says "I'm here if

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you need anything." without using those words. You must develop your own communication style and greeting, but remember, phrases like "Can I help you with anything?" are overused. Bruce Baker encourages salespeople to greet with an open ended

question or comment. We often ask our customers, "How is your garden this season?" Asking "Can I help you?" only requires a "yes" or "no" response, thus ending the conversation before it can even start.



Always take feedback to heart. If you ever hear anything negative about your store or any of your employees, immediately take measures to correct the problem. People are far more likely to pass along a negative experience to friends than a positive one. You can do a lot today to ensure that future interactions with every customer are positive and memorable.

As farmers and small business owners, there are many, many things buzzing through our minds at every moment. It is easy to get distracted from providing top notch customer service.

But always remember that customers are the key to the existence of your business and the key to your success.



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