

# Customer retention in a Google world

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We live in the Google generation, where we don't want training when the course is scheduled – we want to solve our own problems by typing the question into Google. We don't need to go on a training course to learn how to use PC software – we play with it and when we get stuck we press F1 and ask a talking paper clip for help. With the answers being increasingly at our fingertips, the role of the professional advisor is changing as quickly as search engine rankings.

I don't want to spend a morning in an insurance broker's office – I want to buy insurance, book a holiday, visit the supermarket and read the news when the children are in bed. For me, gone are the days of standing in queues. I bank online – paper money being a minor irritation these days – and I can watch the world go by through the windows on my desk.

I can remember, as a child, seeing programs on TV such as Tomorrow's World which predicted we would have shorter working weeks and more leisure time. I wouldn't say I have more leisure time as such, I can just choose which parts of my day are leisure and which are work. In fact, as I sit at my desk, the distinction between work, leisure, play and commerce has blurred to the point where there are no longer clear separations.

As a service provider myself, of coaching and training services, these changes affect me too. One UK training directory website lists over 16,000 training courses. The choice in the market for coaches is so overwhelming that client's don't know how to choose the right coach, and the franchised coaching schools exploit this by creating uncertainty and doubt on the subject of qualifications and licensing in order to tempt clients into their closed communities. Of course, this is the same situation as with mobile phone and home power tariffs. The service providers make the tariffs complicated so that the average consumer has to ask an expert for help – that expert being a retailer of those services.

As some suppliers try to create confusion, more consumer opinion and feedback sites emerge. Even the territory of magazines such as Which? is being invaded. Once again, Google comes to the rescue if I want impartial advice from anyone with an opinion to share.

You might be thinking that this situation is getting worse every day, with more choice, more complexity, more confusion driving more customers to find their own answers. In fact, what is happening, in my experience, is that customers are relying on what they have always relied upon – personal relationships. For most people, asking someone who knows is still the preferred choice.

I have the interesting experience of getting sales calls several times a week, which I always welcome because I enjoy the opportunity to develop my own skills. Today, I had a call from someone whose objection handling technique comprised telling me I was wrong and then that if I wasn't interested, there was no point in talking to me. Fortunately, I don't take things like that personally, I always smile as I imagine that poor sales person having to talk to people like me all day. I'm a symptom of the problem. I know too much, so the sales people who call me never have the chance to get into that trusted advisor role. If they tell me a statistic or reference that I want to check, I have Google right in front of me to give me instant feedback on the validity of their claims. If the sales person is selling search engine rankings, I can check their

own rankings as they tell me about their service. If they are selling magazine advertising, I can see if their magazine fits my target audience as we speak.

This makes me a terrible customer. My loyalty is fleeting, because if a service provider lets me down, a thousand more lie at my fingertips. So what makes me loyal to a supplier? Well, I don't think I'm unique at all. I'm sure this matches your experience too.

- I value a supplier who just does the basics consistently well. I don't want value added bells and whistles. I want consistency.
- I value a supplier who is responsive to my enquiries. I have not yet found an estate agent with an answering machine. I presume there must be a good reason for that, but for me it doesn't get my business.
- I don't want a supplier to understand my business. That's my job. What I value is a supplier who understands his or her own business.

So, how does this help you to increase your customer loyalty? Because you can forget the bells and whistles, the solution selling, the latest management gurus and the constant change in your business.

One of the problems that afflicts businesses today is change. Change projects have become an epidemic, and companies literally become lost in change. They are forever changing and never reach the other side. Business re-engineering has been a huge drain on corporate resources, and the reason is often very simple. The pressure of targets forces managers to improve performance, but they don't have any power to change company strategy, so they change the only thing which is within their power – the organisational structure. They think “one more reorganisation and we'll get it right, then we'll be successful”. You may have realised by now that your organisational structure is not the key to your success. Creating the shortest path between your customers and your products is far more important.

A friend of mine recently worked on a performance coaching project in a large financial services call centre. After a few weeks of coaching, the performance of the sales advisors had grown dramatically. As the coaching program reached its end, the company reorganised the sales teams and the performance was back on the floor again.

Charles Darwin studied the evolution of life, and from his work we can learn a great deal about the performance of successful companies. When we study successful species, the reason for their success is often obvious. We can see how Cheetah differ from Lions, so we can understand how they run faster. Your organisational structure, the names of your departments and your corporate colours do not help your customers get to your products. Changing them simply takes your focus away from the important things in your business. To keep your eye firmly on the ball, you can apply a simple rule of thumb to any business change:

- If it was your company, would you still do it?

So stop changing. Instead, just take to your heart and put into action these three simple steps:

1. Concentrate all your efforts on doing the basics consistently well

2. Instead of saying, “yes, but that wouldn’t work here...” say, “what would happen if we did that here?”
3. Stop reading about it and get on with it

Peter Freeth is a leading business coach, trainer and author. His latest book, *Change Magic*, helps you to change your organisation by changing the people within it. It is based on a lifetime of experience in the corporate world and brings together knowledge as diverse as Darwin’s theories of evolution and personal change tools used in coaching and therapy to create an integrated organisation that develops by evolving naturally.



Peter Freeth is a leading business coach and author.

As Managing Director of Excellerate – a business coaching organisation – he brings a wealth of valuable experience gained from a diversity of industrial, commercial and lifestyle environments, which he employs to assist clients seeking to develop into effective leaders, as well as effective professionals.

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