Why Bears Make Bad Customers

By Caroline Jordan MBA

Every business owner should have a picture of his or her ideal customer. When I picture my ideal customer, I see a business owner struggling to find time for all that needs to be done, someone passionate about what they do, someone striving to find answers to make their business run better. By picturing this person in my mind, I am able to develop products and services that I know will benefit that customer. But what happens when a not-so-ideal customer enters the mix?

Recently, I moved from a suburban location to a very woodsy location. One of my first orders of business was to set up my bird feeders. In my mind, I saw my ideal customers as cheerful, little songbirds. I also knew that I would get my share of chipmunks, squirrels, and field mice. I knew the products I was providing (sunflower seeds and suet) would satisfy all those customers.

And then, along came the bear.

And with the bear, came trouble. Feeders emptied, poles knocked askew, and a suet feeder missing in action.

Now, I have nothing against bears on a personal level. They're really delightful creatures. They are also, however, dangerous and can cause a great deal of property damage. In short, the bear is NOT my ideal customer.

So, what do you do when you attract a customer who is too much trouble, too much work, and costs you far too much time and expense? For the health of your business and for your own sanity, you need to discourage those customers from using your services or buying your products.

That's a tough thing for most business owners to do. Especially when money is tight and you feel like you have to accept every sale. But the cost of trying to satisfy a customer who isn't the right fit will, in the long and short run, do more harm than good.

Suppose I decided to take on my bear as a customer. I would spend so much time, money and energy trying to feed my bear that my other customers—the ones I wanted to attract in the first place—would get no product or service. The bear would take up all of my resources and cause much damage along the way. He would become that exhausting, irritating, no fun to work with customer that we all end up with at one point or another.

Bears are easy customers to discourage. The birdfeeders come inside in the evening now, removing the primary attraction. If he still comes sniffing around, we'll progress to loud noises and other tactics that bears find obnoxious.

So, if you have a customer, like my bear, who is taking up all your resources without contributing to the success of your business, find ways to discourage him. Raise your prices, refer him to a competitor, or set clearer boundaries on your time. Doing so will allow you to take care of the customers who are the best fit for your business.

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