

Build relationships to build your business

By Kaye Patchett

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Before Peggy Raisglid opened her vegan restaurant last September, she knew the novelty would not mean success.

So she did her homework.

Raisglid looked at three elements before opening Lovin' Spoonfuls restaurant at 2990 N. Campbell Ave.

"First," she said, "I contacted groups that would be interested in this kind of food; yoga groups and different religious groups on a vegetarian diet – Seventh Day Adventists and Buddhists." Jewish customers who eat kosher also appreciate a menu free of milk or meat products, she said.

"Second, we offer a really quality product." Repeat customers have become the rule rather than the exception, said Raisglid.

"Third, we offer a nice atmosphere. Unique only goes so far."

Research is the key when you want to stand out in a crowd of similar businesses.

"Know your audience and know your competition," said Peter Bramley, president of Ridgewood Associates Public Relations Inc., 220 E. Speedway Blvd. Identify your niche. "Is your product or service uniquely targeted to one business sector or another?"

Perhaps you have experience working with children's organizations that would make your legal or other business attractive to clients in the same area. Check whether any competitor offers the same specialty.

Other ways to make your business special might include superquick service, distinctive décor, special discounts, drive-up windows, or free gift-wrapping.

A unique product, low prices, and extra services are all threads in the red carpet that you roll out for your clients.

"Uniqueness gives businesses a vocabulary – a language they can use to express what it is that they're selling," Bramley said. "Once people come in the door, you can begin the process of building a relationship."

Finding customers begins with advertising.

"Branding is part of telling people who you are," Bramley said. It's the process of combining visuals, like your logo and tagline, with a promise. However, "If they come through the door and their promises aren't fulfilled, they won't come back."

Whether your business is unique or one of a crowd, the U.S. Small Business Association identifies a "strong customer ethic" as the golden rule for success. According to the SBA, a recent National Federation of Independent Business study showed that small businesses that emphasize customer service were "more likely to survive and succeed than

How to make your business unique

- ▶ Make customer service a team effort. Build customer consciousness throughout your organization
- ▶ Small businesses that put heavy emphasis on customer service are more likely to survive and succeed than those who emphasize lower prices or type of product.
- ▶ 65 percent of a company's business comes from existing customers.
- ▶ 91 percent of unhappy customers will never buy again from a company that displeases them, and will voice their dissatisfaction to at least seven other people.
- ▶ Most customers have a strong tendency to stick with businesses with which they are familiar, and are slow to change buying habits unless given a good reason.

Source: U.S. Small Business Administration

competitors who emphasized such advantages as lower prices or type of product."

"I wouldn't go to a place strictly because of price," retired civil engineer Mike Hook said. "If I got treated well, I'd go back to that store. I like it when a person calls me by my first name."

Within reason, he added, "If the friendly ones charge more, I'll pay that additional amount."

In service businesses, "relationships are often built around customer service," Bramley said. In businesses that are generic, "location and value for money becomes more important."

Jack Furrier's Western Tire and Auto Care business has grown from one location in 1963 to 11 branches.

Similar businesses abound, but Furrier said he offers several unique features and services, such as always advertising the total cost of putting new tires on a vehicle.

"Most other companies just advertise the price of the tire," he said. "All you have to pay when you leave us, other than the advertised price, is taxes."

Furrier also offers free tire repair for cars, and "meets or beats" competitors' prices. "We have over 90 percent (customer) retention rate," he said.



Renée Bracamonte/Tucson Business Edge

At Western Tire's Oracle-Magee branch, second-time customer Eric Hoover watched TV while waiting for an oil change.

"I feel comfortable coming back here," he said. "The first time, they took care of me. They were really friendly. It's not always about the money."

Furrier checks periodically to ensure employees always display a welcoming telephone manner. Regular surveys keep him abreast of pricing and special offers by other tire stores.

"Your competition changes," Bramley said. It's important to maintain an eye on who's doing what, and what unique tack they might have taken."

Unusual businesses such as Raisglid's Lovin' Spoonfuls have less direct competition, but still need to work to generate return customers.

Raisglid said she targeted carnivores as well as vegans, emphasizing the health benefits of a menu containing no animal products.

"At least half of the customers are not vegetarians," she said. "They just want to eat healthy."

She also designed an attractive Web site for the business, and chose an easily-memorized telephone number: 325-SPOON. Her location attracts drop-in customers who see her sign.

"I'm vegan," said client Kit Estes, a marketing management consultant; but other elements, like quiet classical music and wait staff who greet him by name and remember what he likes to order, have contributed to turning him into a regular customer.

"Those long-term relationships are incredibly valuable," Bramley said. "You can't keep clients like that if you don't provide the service." But, he cautioned, "Successful business people don't rest on their laurels."

No matter how long you've been in business – "You never take your customers for granted."

"We're the only place in Tucson that serves vegan food in a traditional presentation," says Peggy Raisglid, owner of Lovin' Spoonfuls restaurant, who got to know her customers before she even opened her doors.