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Enhancing Teamwork

—Route Reps & Customers

*Ideas for educating customers
on the value proposition that your
delivery team provides*



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*Shown above: recipients of TRSA's 2002
Above and Beyond Service Award.*

By Troy Lovins

Everyone knows that good relationships between your route reps and your customers are important, but what have you done lately to strengthen those ties? After all, your route reps are the face of your company. The impression they leave every time they interact with a customer will impact customer loyalty and ultimately, revenue retention.

Some in our industry believe that relationships are built by customer appreciation days, cookouts and even entertainment such as providing them with tickets to sporting events. But this traditional

paradigm has shifted over the last decade. Our buyers and decision makers are far savvier than in the past. After all, your competitors could always buy better seats, bigger gift certificates, or fancier dinners. Instead, we should focus on changing the way our delivery teams communicate value to customers.

"By properly communicating with our customers, we create a bond of friendship and loyalty," said Jesse Marquez, a route sales rep for Service Uniform in San Antonio. "It makes us more approachable and when situations do arise, they come to us immediately so that we can reach a solution together."

Grow loyalty, not discounts

Changing behavior is never easy, so it's really important that your route reps understand that learning to be better communicators of value will enhance customer loyalty, satisfaction, revenue/customer retention and, ultimately, delivery team pay. This also may mean investing an extra couple of minutes with each customer, but the long-term benefits of this method far outweigh the additional moments required each day.

First, you must determine the current role of your route reps. Are they acting as delivery boys, or as true service representatives? The difference—a delivery boy drops off necessary items to a list of addresses daily, while a service representative focuses on delivering quality customer value with each delivery. A delivery boy is focused on finishing their assigned route as quickly as possible. By contrast, a service representative is concerned with solving customer issues and meeting their needs. Route reps are responsible not only for timely and accurate deliveries, but also for anticipating customer needs. The following steps can prove crucial in implementing a relationship-building system that will guarantee customer satisfaction and create loyalty that goes beyond pricing.

Step 1. Evaluate the value you bring to your customers

Start by getting your delivery team together and have them think carefully about the value they deliver. Work together to make a detailed list of the duties they perform on behalf of your customers, taking note of each task, including those that are unseen and uncharged. Then, think of ways that set your business apart from your competitors. You may even want to ask your sales team to sit in for part of the session—after all, they know your primary selling points and are often familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of your local competitors.

More than likely, you'll reveal how your company exceeds expectations—often in ways that your customer doesn't know about. Sure, most customers were briefed on these services during the initial sales presentation. Yet the odds of their now recalling those differentiators are slim to none. That's where the importance of continuous communication comes in.

Step 2. Show customers the value they can see

It's time to take credit for all the things that we do behind the scenes for customers. Did you repair three shirts and six sets of pants this week? Did you make extra deliveries of linens for a holiday? Did you replace an old used garment for a new one? Did you clean or organize a soil area? Did you 'rekey' a locker? Did you return a wallet that was left in the pants pocket of one of the uniforms? Did you take credit for the value you provided? Often, the things that seem to us as just part of our normal routine are things that our customer would truly appreciate ... if they only knew about them. It's often said that a picture is worth a thousand words. With each delivery, take a moment to show the "new" shirt you ordered for an employee. Show the actual repaired garments and explain that you provide this service most weeks at "no" additional charge.

"Having strong communication with our route rep and learning facts about our uniform rental company enabled us to build strong relationships," said René Racine, service manager for Auto

Gouverneur, a car dealership and customer of Jolicoeur Uniform in Montreal, Canada. "The value statements we heard gave us confidence, but their customer service confirmed the pride they have for their company and helped us to feel more like a family."

One way you can keep that family spirit going is to make sure your route rep spends a couple of minutes with your customer. Go beyond just having them sign this week's invoice—after all, you can't grow a relationship without spending a little time together ... and a little time can go a long way. When stopping by the office to get your signature, take a few seconds to get to know your customer and tell them what you've done for them over the last week to help them understand the value they *can* see and the value that they *can't* see. Occasionally, take this message beyond your direct contact. Take credit with the decision maker and accounts payables clerk, or anyone else who may have had an influence on the decision that could have an impact on the future revenue of the account.

Step 3. Tell customers about the value they can't see

It's also important for route reps to sell the value that the customer can't see. Think about the master list that your team put together of their duties, benefits and selling points. Then, extend the list of strategically identified items that makes your company unique from the things that your customer can see to the things that they can't. The latter group includes things that you do, services you offer and facts about your company that they may not know.

Have each of those items printed onto business-card-sized papers that can be delivered along with your invoice when a route rep makes each delivery. We recommend creating a list of 26 items. Use one each week, rotating the list or adding new items twice a year. Sometimes it's the smallest details that make the difference. Encourage your customer to keep this library of value-added propositions. They could come in handy sometime in the future and help you combat a competitive situation.

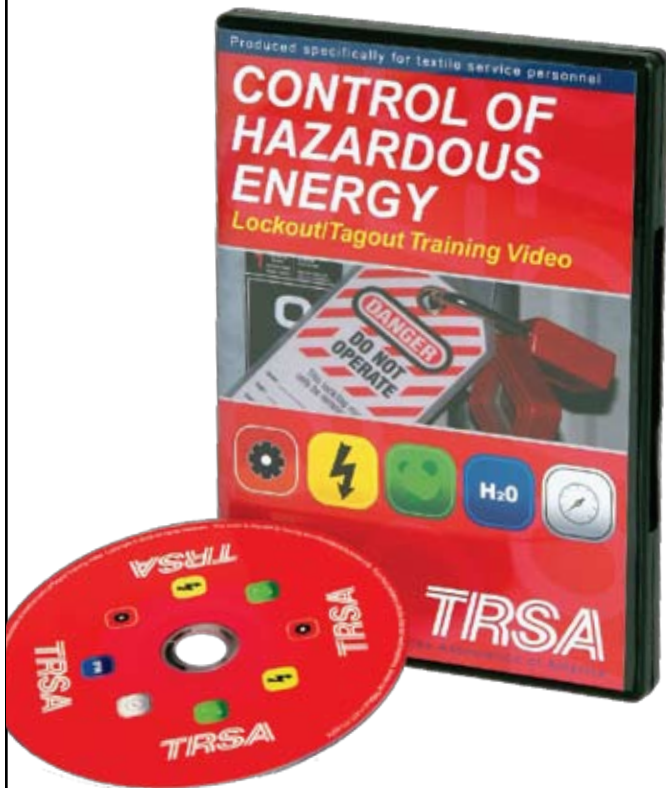
Here are a few examples of positive messages you can send weekly to customers:

- A. "When you work with ABC Company you are working with a company that has a history of serving this community. We've been located in insert city name for over X years and are proud to be your neighbor."
- B. "At, ABC Company we take great measures to minimize your costs at every opportunity. That's why we always pick up any hangers lying around and return them to our shop, to help reduce material expenses."
- C. "ABC Company invests heavily in technology to better support clients like you. Last year, we invested \$XX in insert technology to bring you greater value."
- D. "The staff at ABC Company truly believes in our company. Our average staff tenure is XX years and we look forward to spending many more with you."
- E. "ABC Company renewed insert well-respected customer name to a multi-year service agreement based on their confidence in our XX-year service history."

After a few months of delivering these value-added propositions,

Invaluable Training Tool

(at a nice price!)



Wouldn't it be great to have a concise, industry-specific training resource that could provide both hourly and salaried staff with the basics on OSHA's requirements for lockout/tagout training? But these resources often cost hundreds of dollars, and most don't deal specifically with textile services.

Until now, TRSA has the lockout/tagout training resource you need at a price you can afford. Thanks to the Safety Committee, TRSA is offering a new professional-quality DVD, *Control of Hazardous Energy—Lockout/Tagout Training Video*, for only \$100! With *Control of Hazardous Energy*, your staff will learn the basics of lockout/tagout in practical, step-by-step lessons. The DVD will help companies train "affected" personnel, as well as executives and technicians. To order (nonmembers: \$400), call TRSA's Vielka Chandler at 877/770-9274, or visit <http://www.trsa.org/store/booksearch.asp> (keyword "lockout").

Strategic Communications

your customer will look at the route service person and your company in a different light. Just as importantly, your route reps will be able to effectively shift the focus of any potential competitive conversation from "price" to "value."

Jolicoeur Uniform in Montreal, Canada, began implementing this system earlier this year. "Using Value Added Propositions has led to improved customer trust and overall relations," said Sylvain Letourneau, Service Director at Jolicoeur. "Most importantly, we have enjoyed significant improvement in our customer renewal process."

Step 4. Train route reps to look for new value opportunities

Route reps should continually look for new value opportunities for their customers. One way to do this is to do a regular inventory analysis and reduce or increase inventory to reflect actual usage. Try recommending a new item that would bring more value by reducing



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Recipients of UniFirst Corp.'s prestigious Aldo Croatti Award for retaining 100% of their customers in 2009.

inventory of an item that they don't need. This approach will result in additional value for the customer and often adds extra revenue as well.

The same theory applies to looking for ways to exchange our competitors' expense items with our "value items." For example, consider introducing roll towels as an alternative to a competitor's paper towels. Not only does the exchange increase your margins but, since roll towels are typically 50% less expensive than paper, it also proves your commitment to driving value to your customers.

Improving the relationships between route reps and your customers is possible by sizing up your company's value proposition, telling clients about the values you offer (both seen and unseen) and continually looking for new opportunities. Sure, it takes some extra time and effort. But the results will pay off in higher retention rates and enhanced customer loyalty. **TR**



Troy Lovins owns Performance Matters, a strategic consulting company dedicated to the rental laundry industry. He has over 20 years of industry experience from independents to regional and national textile rental companies. For details, go to www.performance-matters.com or call 803/897-0044.