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Keeping Customers Happy

New students, new students, more students- aren't we as studio owners always worrying about gaining new students? We know that if we want to keep those doors open we've got to gain new students- right? Well, the answer is yes- and no.

Many dance teachers have found they have better success if, instead of looking for ways to increase enrollment by focusing on new students, they turn their attention and efforts to the students currently taking classes in their studios.

What can you do for the students are already coming to your studio? You can make them feel special! So special that they will tell all their friends.

Times and social customs are changing rapidly these days. Every professional knows that as times change, you must change and upgrade procedures and techniques. But one thing what shouldn't change is your philosophy of delivering as much as possible to the customer at the lowest fair price.

That good old-fashioned service attitude will make the difference in retaining your present students and will turn them into your best salespeople. Satisfied students will bring you more students than you can handle.

At our studio it's been determined through questionnaires that more than 88% of our new students are referred from our satisfied students. The student is a customer and you've got to please the customer.

Quality customer service starts when you transmit a positive attitude towards others. You must identify the needs of your customers and then provide for those needs. With competition in our industry on the rise, it makes economic sense to give quality customer service.

The basic customer needs four things: to be understood; to feel welcomed; to feel important; to feel comfortable. Everyone has these needs. Think over how a dance school can fulfill these needs.

Who is our customer? Is it the student or the parents? The answer is both. Let's address both as our subjects.

Generally the first impression your customers encounter will be over the telephone. Make sure you have your best person answering the phone. You never have a second chance to make a first impression. It is strongly preferable that a human is answering the phone, not a machine. Of course, humans are not perfect (but neither are machines.) Problems are sometimes caused by the person doing the over-the-phone registration forgetting some important information.

Post a "new student checklist" near the phone and don't let the new or prospective customer off the phone until all items are completely discussed. Then, put the name and phone number on the "new student list" on the front desk bulletin board. Every morning the receptionist should memorize the names and class times of the new students expected that day. When the apprehensive new customer walks in the door, she will be greeted by a friendly person behind the counter who says, "Hi, Mrs. Johnson? You're here with Michelle for the 9:30 four-year old class, right? It's nice to meet you (with a firm, friendly handshake)."

After the necessary paperwork is finished, the receptionist should take the new customer on a tour of the facility noting: bathrooms, observation area, lost and found spot, et cetera- especially mentioning other programs such as dance aerobics and boys' classes while walking through the studio. When the class is ready to start, the receptionist should introduce the new student to the teacher. The key is to make that new customer feel as special as possible.

Remember, the attitude you send out is usually the attitude you'll get back. At the conclusion of the class the teacher should walk the new student to the parent while asking the child how he or she liked the class. Explain the reasons behind your activities in that class to the parents as well as your major philosophy. For example, our philosophy is to teach the children dance in a fun, safe environment and increase the child's self-confidence. Every class is designed to meet those goals.

That evening we mail out a "glad you could join us" postcard with a personal note. Within two days we reach the parents by phone. We ask how the child liked the class and if the parents had any questions about the program.

What else can be done for the present student? We send a birthday card to each student. When a student calls in sick, we mail a get-well card that day. If a child has a particularly good day, a special "certificate" is sent to the parents and child in the mail. If a parent makes a positive suggestion, or even a negative comment, we send them a thank you not with an "Exceptional Parent Award" certificate in the mail. Each instructor has embossed dance school thank you notes to express appreciation through the mail if a child gives a gift. Children love getting mail and won't forget your kindness soon.

When a parent makes a negative comment, it must be handled very carefully. The dissatisfied customer who leaves will tell ten people about the negative experience. Seven out of that ten may not re-enroll. A happy customer, I'm sorry to report, tells on the average of two people about the positive experience. Always work with customers in the same manner you'd like to be treated. If you've made a change that reflected a suggestion or a complaint, always make a "follow-up" call to thank the person giving the input for the suggestion and tell them of the change.

We have another customer service slogan we live by. It's "give the customer what they expect". From the beginning, if you give the customers what they expect, they'll be more ready to accept you and your policies. For example, people expect prompt replies to their calls left on an answering machine. Make that an important goal. They wanted to talk to you. You weren't there. You must get back to them as soon as possible. Stop and think of what else the customer

expects. Make a list and insist of pursuing excellence in each of those areas. Quality is free. Give it!

After you give the customer what you feel they expect- give them more. Have special events just for them- Christmas parties, Easter Egg Hunts, or Halloween Haunted Houses. You could provide workshops about aspects of raising children or other topics of interest, led by local experts. Hand out our articles pertaining to children. Have a bulletin board with information concerning children's health and fitness. Do more than they expect.

Many studios expend a tremendous amount of money and effort to gain new customers and minimal effort to keep old customers. Listen to your customer complaints. Get out these and talk to them personally. It will tell you as much as a paid consultant would tell you. Have a suggestion box and encourage your student's parents to use it.

Our main goal is to not let a "present student" become a former student. Quality may bring them in, but excellent customer service will keep them. Knowledge is power, but only is applied.

Take these ideas and PLEASE THE CUSTOMER!

Patti Komara's Bio

Patti Komara has owned a gymnastics school in Dyer, Indiana since 1969 offering gymnastics, dance, swimming, and a fitness-based educational preschool called Gym-N-Learn. Patti began speaking at national seminars in 1981 and has led hundreds of training workshops. Patti's Tumblebear Connection has produced more than 80 instructional DVDs. She has written books on yearly lesson plans for The internationally known Tumblebear Gym Program, School-age Gymnastics, Dancing GymBears, YogaBears, CheerBears, Gym-N-Learn, and her very successful Swim Program. Patti co-authored the original USAG preschool KAT certification program. In 2003 she was named USAG Business Leader of the Year. In 2005 Patti was selected as Client of the Year by Action International and in 2006 was given the national service award by USAG. In 2009 Patti began formal consulting for those in our industry and in 2010 her gym, Patti's All-American, was named in her local newspaper as "Best of the Region" once again. Patti has over 6000 subscribers to her "In the Loop Monthly E-Newsletter" which she has published since February 2007.