

The Top Ten Things Your Sign Customers Want in 2006

The key to running a successful sign business is being able to offer what your customers want.

Here we are at the start of a New Year. Let's all make this a record year for us—and our customers as well. We can achieve this by remembering to deliver the basics that everyone wants. I have made a list of ten things that customers want, and I hope you will use them to make your sign year a successful one.

#1. Common courtesy. Treat everyone—and I mean everyone—with the same respect you would treat your spouse, your children, or your parents. It does not matter if a person calls you on the telephone and asks you how “low you can go” on a set of magnetic signs. Be nice and give them your price. When they hang up, so what? Are you really chasing the lower end of the sign customer food chain?

It is all about averages, and your attitude will make or break your day. We simply cannot sell every sign we have the opportunity to quote, and that is a good thing. Evenings and weekends are for us and our family's enjoyment—not working overtime

in a shop full of low-priced sign projects.

#2. A true sign professional. Look the part, act the part, and dress the part. Conduct yourself as a true sign industry professional. Do not talk like other sign people talk. Show up on time dressed to work and always deliver more than what you have sold. Throw in some personal attention to detail and some extra care.

Your customers will remember this special attention, and they will spread your company name around to all of their friends (many of whom also own businesses too).

#3. Full value for their money. There should be no shortcuts this year. Double-coat the backs of every MDO panel. Seal the small gaps in the edges of your panels with latex caulk before your paint. Countersink your screws, fill the heads, and touch up with paint. Crimp the “S” hooks closed so the wind will not blow the sign off the chain. Take a sand rake to your installation site, clean the surrounding area around your sign, and take the debris with you.

Apply your graphics without



creases and bubbles and *s-l-o-w* down and spend some time when working on location. Do not act rushed. Make the customer feel as if they are the most important person in the world, because in their eyes, they are!

Delivering full value for the customer will guarantee “your prices for your signs.”

#4. Your attention. Every customer should be in your database (along with their buying history of previously purchased products). Some customers buy frequently—and often at the same times during the course of the year.

Study their buying habits and call them before they call you. Remind them that they may need to order a particular sign or two, because they have always ordered those signs at this time of the year.

Customers like personal attention, and you can easily increase your sales every month of the year if you make it a practice to call them before they think about calling you.

#5. A competitive advantage. Most of our sign customers have their own competition to worry about. What do the signs of their own competitors look like? They have to be better in appearance and in design in order to attract the customers of the competing business. Looks count, and good-looking signs will draw a lot of customers into any store.

Are you making signs for your customer’s competitors as well? A lot of us do! Many of us serve similar customers within the same industries, and we have the advantage of offering new, better, and improved products, as we all learn new skills and discover new sign making materials.

Even in my own sign company, I know that we produce and install signs much differently than we did back in 1979. Back then, everything was hand-lettered, hand-cut, and (for the holes in the ground) “hand-dug.” Times have definitely changed for the better, as our products continue to improve in quality, appearance, durability, and longevity. Everyone wins: Our customers are happy with the work we have done, and we enjoy a lot of referral business.

Delivering a competitive edge to our customers and clients will keep us on their marketing team for years to come. Continue to study the sign work of others and emulate their techniques and

methods. Everyone wins when the level of our products increases in value.

#6. A source they can call upon in an emergency. Many of our customers allow us ample time to complete a project, but sometimes there are extenuating circumstances that we must face. Upcoming events are usually planned ahead for months, but what if your customer has to hold a “quick sale” this weekend to raise money to meet payroll or some other important reason? We should accommodate them whenever and wherever we can.

Sure we should jump through hoops to help our existing customers, but we should also be careful about encroaching upon our personal and family time as well. With three days notice, we can usually come in a few hours early and complete the needed project to help our customer “out of a bind.” This is being nice and courteous.

If the customer develops a pattern of waiting to the last minute, then some “customer training” is in order. We can tell the customer that we will jump through those hoops “only this time” and we will meet their tight deadline without any price penalties. If the habitually late ordering customer does this to us over and over again, we must enforce the appropriate rush charges to make it worth our while to juggle our entire schedule to accommodate him once again.

#7. A sign company that stays on the cutting edge in marketing ideas. If you supply signs to the automobile dealers, the dry cleaners, the pet shops, or the car rental agencies in your town, then read the same magazines they are reading. Go online and subscribe to *American Drycleaner* or *Car Talk* or *Successful Pet Shop Marketing*. These are just typical names, but you can go to Google.com, type in “Dry Cleaner Publications,” and find a long list of magazines and newsletters you can subscribe to for free (or very little money). Read the articles and look at the photos of how their peers advertise with signs and window lettering.

Stay on the “cutting edge” in suggesting new and exciting products for your existing customers. Many times you do not have to reinvent the wheel; all you have to do is copy an idea from another market and introduce it in your market for your customer.

I have two dry cleaning chains in my

customer base. While surfing the Internet one day, I noticed a dry cleaner in another state using a large coat hanger as a wall sign, with banner fabric stretched over the lower portion (like a shirt protector would be on an actual hanger). This made a terrific sign for the wall of my customer, and (even better) a sign like this one could be found nowhere in my Houston-area market. I saw an idea, borrowed it, made my own changes to it, and sold it to my customer, who benefited from it immediately.

#8. A sign company that is open for business. Have a well-stocked sign shop with all the basics in stock and ready for production. Rush orders happen, and you must be ready to go to work *now!*

Be sure to have enough sign boards, MDO, aluminum sheet, Coroplast, PVC, high-density urethane, or whatever else you use for your background panels. You must stock the basic background paints, the basic colors of vinyl, the basic colors of foil, the basic colors of ink, ample fasteners, etc.

If you receive a sign order and you have to drive twenty or thirty miles to pick up basic supplies, you will cost yourself money. Maintain an inventory of products that you would usually turn within thirty days. You are not a sign supply warehouse, so keep your inventories at a manageable level. Be “open for business” five days per week!

#9. A sign company that stays current in technology and education. School is never out for the professional. Read every issue of *Sign Builder Illustrated*. Subscribe to my monthly newsletter *Prosperity Pricing and Mega Marketing*. Attend tradeshow, Letterhead meets, and sign supplier open houses. Sign up for seminars and workshops. Enroll in continuing education classes and study Photoshop, public speaking, marketing, art classes, and maybe a foreign language.

Never risk the chance of being classified as an “old school” sign shop. Of course “old school” techniques such as gold leaf command high fees, but you should never chance being described as “behind the times” when someone describes your sign company.

#10. Free Stuff! Who doesn’t want freebies every now and then? When we are creating magnetic signs, we always reduce the image of the magnetic sign and create about six to eight copies of this sign that are “business card” size.

Every customer loves the extra “freebies,” and most of the time, they will place an order for a hundred or so of these refrigerator-type magnetic signs to give away as premiums.

Another freebie we give away is a small “kids name” label, composed in the waste area of our digital prints. One of my favorite customers is John. He has a young daughter named Michelle. While making some printed decals for another customer, I can compose Michelle’s name in a nice, frilly font along the upper portion of the vinyl, which would otherwise be thrown away. I simply create the name once (with a

perimeter-cut border) and repeat it along the length of the “revenue” run.

When cut on the plotter, I separate the paying job from the freebie job. I roll the “gift” decals onto a small core, cut them to size on my band saw, and take them with me the next time I go to see John. While John is giving me another order, I reach into my pocket and give him the small roll of decals for his daughter.

“Here John, give these to Michelle,” I will tell him. Of course John is all smiles.

For just a few extra minutes of my time (and no extra cash out of my pocket at all), I have just cemented a great rela-

tionship with John for just a few extra minutes of my time. Customers like free stuff, so be sure to give all the free stuff you can, especially the free stuff that is free to you!

Now go out and make 2006 a year to remember for you, your family, and your customers as well. The business is yours for the taking—so *take it!* ☺

Mark is the author of How to Achieve Success, Wealth, and Happiness in Your Sign Business, which is available for viewing, along with his 2006 Commercial Sign Pricing manual and CD-ROM, at www.signprice.com.