

HOME FURNISHINGS

## My Way: Claremont Rug Co.'s Jan David Winitz on why customer efficiency is not customer service

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*Jan David Winitz is co-founder/president of Claremont Rug Company*

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One of the most vivid lessons that I ever learned about the rewards of delivering exceptional client service all started with light bulbs.

I was at a potential client's home for the first time. They were an elderly couple and after we exchanged greetings. I saw that in one of the spaces they wished to furnish, three light bulbs were burnt out. I insisted that one of my staff members climb up on a ladder and change them before we started.

It was a simple gesture. They needed some help, and we were there and able. Through this, we began a trusting relationship and ultimately placed \$4 million of rare antique Oriental rugs with them. The woman later remarked that they were influenced as much by our willingness to serve as by the quality of the product we offered.

I bring this up because often it is the little things that set the tone and begin rewarding business relationships.

We live in a business world where, with ever more frequency, reports, surveys and polls conclude that customers are more demanding, expect quicker responses and, although they view technology as vital, they also sometimes experience it as an impediment to the quality of the service that they desire.

All too often, the retailer's response is to study algorithms or to develop applications that remove the human element from the equation, confusing "customer service" with "customer efficiency."

I work daily with clients at the elite end of the financial spectrum. Even though my business, Claremont Rug Company, is in a niche category, the way that we interact with our clients is a time-tested approach to customer service that can be applied across the entire luxury retail environment.

It has been my experience over almost four decades of business that it is those actions not measured in studies or surveys that have the greatest impact in creating customer loyalty.

Education is key

We conduct business by engaging our clients in an educational process, which becomes the basis of our interaction with them. We treat every client as an individual and create a personalized program to satisfy his or her particular needs and interests.

Having written extensively about customer experience and expectations, I start from a perspective that successful sales are based on relationships, and the best relationships have a strong educational basis.

It is not simply about giving clients information. It starts with a highly educated staff and employees at every level who are committed to the process.

I call this approach "client first," which is based on the premise that customer service begins at the first interaction with a client, not with a sale.

As well as embracing technology to make our customer interactions as seamless and all-encompassing as possible, first of all, I teach my sales staff to be active listeners who are willing to give clients their time and attention.

Differentiators

The Internet and our Web site? We were introduced to it in the late 1990s by a client who was a cofounder of Adobe.

Now, more than 70 percent of our transactions involve the Internet.

Our Web site is extensive and provides helpful articles, a curated inventory of more than 1,000 images of individual antique rugs and a vast array of educational information.

We are moving rapidly to employ video as an additional educational tool.

Payments? It is not about the fees that we pay credit card providers. It is about how our clients want to pay.

Consider this: one recent study published in *Luxury Daily* found that consumers are interested in paying in a personalized manner, to the degree that an estimated \$1.1 billion in potential sales were lost because stores did not have a customer's preferred payment method.

The takeaway, to the degree possible, is to transact your business using the methods that your clients ask for and embrace. Design your systems around client expectations, not simply to make it easier for you.

The same study stated that the "the lines between the physical and digital shopping worlds are dissolving."

In our business, we have active clients on five continents, but only one physical location. Yet, our business grows decade after decade, through economic up and down cycles.

Many clients rarely or never visit our gallery. Instead, they take advantage of our extensive Web site with its visual library of images.

We adhere to the notion that our clients, even those accustomed to the highest levels of customer service, appreciate our commitment to delivering the "unexpected," whether it is an exquisite antique Oriental rug or simply that we are relationship, not transaction, oriented.

Customer experience

In the luxury segment, such basics as answering the telephone with a knowledgeable, patient person, not an automated system is a must-do to ensure a loyal clientele.

At the top end of the luxury market, where my gallery resides, the concept of customer experience revolves around education, relationship and the mindset of customer accommodation.

In other words, anticipating a request allows us to say "yes" rather than having to search for an alternative solution during the process of a customer interaction.

Last year, we initiated an approach that in-house we term "Claremont Prime," meaning we acknowledge that clients expect first-rate service in everything we do and do not want to wait for it.

We even have a salesperson on-call for important transactions evenings and on Sundays, the times when our ultra-busy clients often have time to shop.

WE HAVE EXPERIENCED over and over again that successfully working with highly affluent clients depends on gaining trust and confidence in our expertise.

Our central posture is that whether a particular interaction evolves into a sale or not, clients should know that we will be just as interested in talking with them the next time that they call.

For us, that is the epitome of client service and how we have built a business whose success is rooted in creating a level of client satisfaction that ensures long-term relationships.

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