

How Big Do Customer Gifts Have to Be to Be Effective?

Contributed by Bill Lee
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The answers vary widely, but one that I can almost always count on is, "I can't compete with the premium programs a particular competitor offers."

{bot_wrgoogle}Or, "My main competitor gives customers in my market coupons for a dinner for two at a local restaurant."

Or, "My competitor's incentive travel programs are killing me."

I especially enjoy discussing these kinds of selling obstacles because several years ago I headed up my company's incentive travel division, so it's an area I've had some experience with, on both sides of the table. Plus I have some strong feelings about the power of relatively small customer gifts.

Incentive travel comes and goes in most industries, as do catalog offers, rebate programs, etc. But as you look around your industry today, I'll bet you still see quite a few companies that continue to offer various types of incentives as an inducement for customers to buy.

I do believe in the value of BIG GIFTS such as incentive travel. They can frequently be quite effective. But incentive programs such as these are designed by corporations, not by the salespeople themselves. Innovative salespeople must come up with their own ways to compete.

But over the past few months, I have become convinced that relatively SMALL, but thoughtful customer GIFTS can also carry a powerful punch. I'm referring to a gift that creates a memory, making the recipient think positive thoughts about the gift giver -- YOU. YOU, the salesperson, can compete with competitor's corporate programs if you are so motivated.

Just last week, an old friend and I traveled to a small town in southeastern Mexico to work at a children's home we support. Each day, we walked about a half-mile from our hotel to the children's home, passing dozens of small storefront businesses. One of them -- a small grocery store -- owned and operated by Emma, a lady whom I would guess to be in her late 60s.

I had met Emma on a trip a month earlier when I randomly chose her store to purchase some long distance phone cards. She went out of her way to tell me how much she and the townspeople respected us for the work we did at the home. So here I am back in Mexico needing more LD phone cards; who would you guess I bought them from?

After paying Emma for the phone cards, she asked if I would allow her to give me a small gift. I said, "Yes, I would be honored to accept it."

In a moment, Emma had retrieved from under her sales counter a small salt shaker and toothpick holder, both handmade from Mexican pine. As she handed the two small gifts to me, she said, "When you use these, please think of Emma." I walked out of her small store feeling really special.

Small gifts, especially gifts with a degree of uniqueness, given in the spirit of appreciation can be really powerful.

Emma taught me to show more appreciation to my clients. She made me realize that it's not necessary to spend a huge amount of money to make your clients feel like their something special.

Idea #1: One such gift I have found to be appropriate is a small book: Leadership 101 by John C. Maxwell. What a powerful little book for managers who would like to improve their leadership skills. www.amazon.com

Idea #2: Following a seminar presentation or consulting assignment, I always send my clients a copy of my church cookbook, Let Us Keep the Feast: Food from the Foothills of South Carolina. It is a hardback cookbook that I know their family will enjoy. It's not just any cookbook, it's MY church cookbook, which makes it special. www.amazon.com

Idea #3: The little book, The Fred Factor, by Mark Sanborn is another example. The hero in Sanborn's book is Fred, Sanborn's postman. In fewer than one hundred pages, the author uses Fred to teach any employee no matter how mundane his or her job may be can -- armed with the right attitude -- make that job something special. I know my clients will find ideas from this little book that they can implement in their respective organizations. www.marksanborn.com

Idea #4: Pivot is a book by Dr. Alan Zimmerman that uses many quotes and all kinds of research to illustrate to the reader how important attitude is to success. Zimmerman is highly convincing as he makes the point that a positive attitude is a person's choice. www.drzimmerman.com

Idea #5: What are your prospects' hobbies? One of my prospects is practically obsessed with his Scottish heritage. I ran a Google search on his surname and turned up all sorts of information on his family name that I shared with him. My

cost: a few minutes of time. My reward: a prospect who became a customer three weeks later.

Scout out other informative books and inexpensive gifts that you believe "fit" the personality of the individual customer. Compile your own list.

Control what you can control. Don't waste time worrying about what you cannot control. But take action, positive action. The worst response to the marketing activities of a competitor is no response.

Good selling!

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