

## Breaking Up is Hard to Do

How to use the loss of a customer as a learning opportunity.

**T**he phone rings and you answer it. The voice on the other end of the line is a familiar one. “We have to have a serious discussion,” she says. You swallow hard and ask, “About what?”

“About us.”

“What about us?”

“Things just aren’t the same as they used to be.”

“What isn’t the same?”

“You know... things. You’ve changed. You just don’t pay attention to my needs the way you used to. You don’t treat me like I deserve to be treated. I’m just not satisfied in our relationship anymore.”

Your heart skips a beat and you feel gravity pulling the blood from your face. Droplets of sweat begin seeping from the pores on your forehead and tickling your skin as they roll toward your eyebrows. “What are you saying?” you ask—your voice starting to quiver.

“There’s no easy way to tell you this so I’ll just say it,” she pauses. “I’ve found someone else.”

That queasy feeling hits you like a ton of bricks. Your stomach feels like it has suddenly shrunk to the size of a golf ball and has settled right below your sternum. You’re going to be sick.

You’re eyes open wide and then the questions start. Can this really be happening? Why me? Why now? What could I have done differently? If only I could get another chance...

“Can I come see you?” you ask.

It’s true. Learning that your customer has moved her work to another surface finisher can be a traumatic and emotional

experience.

I imagine most finishers have lost a significant customer at least once. While the loss of a customer is difficult at any time, it is especially hard in today’s economy when any reduction in revenue really hurts. The question is what to do when it happens.

Start by taking it personally. The loss of a customer is often a reflection on the performance of your company and is the ultimate in negative customer feedback.

Next speak with the customer and ask for an opportunity to meet in person. Be up front and let her know that you fully acknowledge her right to source the work anywhere she sees fit. Tell her that ideally you could win back her confidence but that in the absence of that opportunity you want to learn what you could have done differently.

Assuming the customer is willing to meet, encourage her to open up and be honest. Tell her you want to understand everything she prefers about the new finisher. Pay specific attention to her complaints about your company’s performance.

Next, listen. Keep listening. When you are all done listening, listen some more. Ask tons of questions. Ask for clarification on anything you don’t understand completely. Avoid the temptation to offer up potential solutions right away or to cut the customer short and thus miss out on gathering valuable information. By all means do not be argumentative.

Once the customer’s reasons for leaving are fully communicated, review the list with her. Repeat each and every complaint and acknowledge that you understand the impact your shortcomings had on her business. Ask if you properly communicated all of the concerns. If the answer is no, keep listening.

Once all of the concerns have been fully communicated and understood, ask “assuming I was able to win your confidence that each and every one of your concerns would be addressed, and knowing you have no obligation to, would you be willing to give us one last chance?”

If the customer opens the door for one last opportunity, your next temptation is to celebrate silently in victory. Avoid this temptation, too. Instead,



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ask the customer for a follow-up appointment several days in the future. Explain that, rather than promising the world right here and now, you want to make sure your team is up to the task. Return to your plant with your notes, discuss each complaint with your team, and devise a corrective action to address each and every one of them. While the corrective actions are being implemented internally, take them to your customer and explain why things will be different in the future.

A second potential scenario is one where the customer who left rebuffs your request for a second chance. In this case, avoid the temptation to burn the bridge. Thank the customer for her time and her past business, admit your regret that things couldn't be worked out, and ask for permission to stay in touch should a future opportunity arise.

In this case, be certain to return to your plant with your notes and cover them in detail with your team so that the entire organization can learn from the experience and avoid a similar one in the future.

Finally, often the negative experience of the customer that left is also being felt by your customers who have not yet chosen to move their work. Whatever the problem, fix it quickly to avoid any future customer defections.

Breaking up is hard to do, especially when you're on the receiving end. Handling the situation in the proper fashion will enable your organization to gain maximum benefit from an otherwise difficult experience and, if you're lucky, may even enable the relationship to continue long into the future. ■



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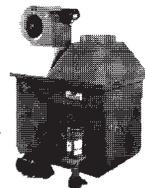
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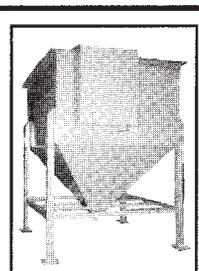
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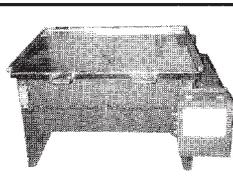


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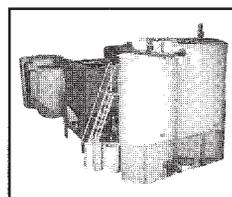
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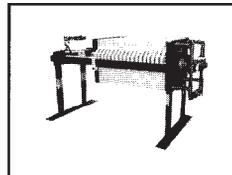
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