

Creating Healthy Customer-VAR Relationships

Beware of taking your long-term customer relationships for granted and remember: your customers' needs may change.

BY TOM CATES, PRESIDENT, THE BROOKESIDE GROUP

How do you measure a healthy customer relationship?

Healthy customers are always looking to expand and improve the relationship because they enjoy working with you. If a customer is exploring a new line of business, do they call you first? Receiving the "first call" when your customer has a question or needs to place an order is a strong indicator of a healthy relationship. Securing the No. 1 spot on speed dial enables you to add value from the start and work with them through to the end. In a strong customer-VAR relationship, the customer deliberately ignores the competition, actively refers business to you and provides helpful feedback.

What are the signs of an unhealthy business relationship (and how do you fix it)?

One word that you never want to hear from a customer is "fine." The word "fine" is an indicator that the customer does not want to engage in conversation and something is wrong. Think about the customers with whom you have healthy relationships. They are happy to provide all of the information necessary for you to do your job well. When you notice that the conversation becomes limited or the lines of communication become weak, chances are your customer is unhappy and could be on the road to defection.

Relationships are a two-way street. If you experience these warning signs, look for ways the customer can invest in the relationship. Get to know your customers on an individual level so you can anticipate future challenges or services they may need. Be prepared when they ask for help. Better yet, offer your services *before* they ask. Moving forward, keep the lines of communication open and work to make yourself irreplaceable.

What's the biggest cause of unhealthy customer relationships?

A huge mistake companies often make is treating all customers the same. Customers' expectations vary across the board, and if you are not tailoring your strategy to

meet the needs of each one, they will find someone else who can.

Let's say your overall business strategy works perfectly for eight out of 10 customers. Most people would consider that a success. But what happens when the two unhappy customers happen to be your greatest source of revenue? You are looking at a huge loss that most companies today cannot afford.

Begin taking the necessary steps to ensure you never get caught flat-footed. Place greater emphasis on the individual relationship. Make your customers *want* to do business with you, even if you do not offer the lowest price. Put forth effort to create and maintain meaningful relationships on an individual basis.



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What are the key safeguards a VAR needs to have in place to ensure long-term healthy customer relationships?

Businesses often take long-term relationships for granted. It is easy to get into the groove and forget that customers' needs may change, especially as a technology VAR. After years of surveying VARs and their customers, data have shown that one of the biggest areas for improvement is asking for customer feedback and regular performance assessments. While this seems intimidating, it is necessary.

One of the keys to ensuring a healthy customer relationship is to always know where you stand. Without realizing it, VARs often over- or underestimate their customers' perception of the relationship. Keeping that in mind, it is important to survey your customers every once in a while. Take the time to reach out and ask "Hey, how are you doing? How are *we* doing?" You will gain important insight

and also communicate to the customer that they are valued and you are willing to go the extra mile to ensure you are doing the best job you can. Once-a-year surveys will not suffice. If you go too long without communicating with customers about their expectations, by the time you ask for feedback it may be too late. Ask your customers today what you can be doing better and begin building healthy, long-term relationships. ●