

Selling Service

Describing your services to prospective buyers in writing differentiates your company from the competition while creating buyers' service expectations. And you can use that same description as a basis for gathering feedback from buyers. This Combination provides a continuous check and balance. Are you working on the things customers care about? Is that work producing the intended results?

The first step in this is deciding what to include in your written service commitment. This is not a wish list, not your conscience on paper, not a description of what you think you should be doing. What you commit to you must do--or face angry purchasers. Your written service commitment describes the established services your company performs consistently.

Creating Your Service Commitment

Begin by listing the parts of your service program. The first item that comes to mind is warranty service, the second is usually orientation. If these two topics were all you had to work with your service commitment would be short and unspectacular.

Break the habit of thinking of service as only fixing broken items. Service is everything you do to, for, and with customers. Viewing service from this perspective is essential; this is the perspective customers use to evaluate your service. Consider the topics discussed in the example in Figure 1. Builders provide many services to customers long before the orientation or warranty period occurs.

Once you have a complete list, organize the items in the order that customers experience them. Finally, ask yourself what benefit each item provides to your buyers. These service features and benefits are the raw material for your service commitment. As you polish this information into a finished product, keep these important points in mind:

- List and describe only those services you deliver consistently, not those still in the planning stages. New items you have successfully put in place can be added next year when you do your annual revision.
- Express each point of your commitment in concrete terms that are not open to interpretation. For example, instead of promising "fast warranty service" state that "96% of our service requests are acknowledged within one business day and 93% of warranty work orders are completed within 10 work days."
- List the benefit first followed by a description of the service that creates it. Notice how the example in Figure 1 focuses attention on what buyers are most interested in: the benefit to them. This is followed by a clear statement of what practice produces that benefit.
- Review the service commitment draft with all staff. This ensures that you remembered everything and that you are not overstating your case. Listen carefully to the input of front line personnel.
- Give your program a name. Our example is simply called ***Service Commitment . . . 20 Point Customer Satisfaction Program***. Other possibilities include The Finishing Touch, Homeowner CARE (Courtesy, Attention, Response, Excellence) or Service Certified. Be creative; give your service program a personality in line with your product and market.
- Print your service commitment on good quality paper. Select a color and style you can carry

through to all the forms and materials relating to service.

Use Your Service Commitment Effectively

All staff and associates should be thoroughly familiar with the procedures that support the company's service commitment. When everyone understands them the same way, they explain them to customers the same way. Consistency is essential to setting and fulfilling customer expectations. If changes occur in procedures or staff responsibilities, inform everyone then review the information again a week or two later.

Display the commitment in the sales office. Builders and sales counselors struggle with how to talk about service without over promising. A well-written description provides a solution. Sales personnel appreciate the professionalism of this approach and customers appreciate the information. Provide each customer with a copy of the commitment, perhaps including it in your homeowner guide.

Stickers with the service program name can be applied to each related document, starting with the homeowner guide. This reinforces the message and gets your program noticed by customers. These tiny reminders keep service a priority position in the minds of your personnel. Use the same stickers as a seal on thank-you-for-buying-from-us letters, add them to the touch-up kit, door hangers, work orders to trade contractors, and so on.

Use your service commitment as a basis for continuous feedback. This feedback provides a check on performance. Intentions are fine, but it is results that impress customers. Confirm that you consistently hit your service goals by asking for comments from the folks who know it best. This also allows you to respond quickly if the needs and wants of your target market change. Why expend time and energy on things customers are not concerned with while overlooking things they feel are important? Include an item on the survey asking customers what other services they would have liked to have included in the process.

Turn each point from your service commitment into a corresponding survey item. Most companies find they need two surveys. The first might be sent shortly after closing (10-30 days) asking for an evaluation of services up to that point. The second asks for comments on the remaining parts of the service program and the floor plan. Send this one near the end of the warranty period or have the technician who performs year end service deliver it.

If you already survey customers, integrate this material into the existing process rather than create a patchwork quilt. If you do not survey customers, this offers an opportunity to get started.

As surveys are returned, compile a summary of the results. Circulate the summary to company personnel and affected associates. Follow up with a discussion of key points. Contact dissatisfied customers with two intentions: 1) gather details about what went wrong to learn from mistakes, and 2) determine if the relationship can be repaired.

Are there any risks involved in using a written service commitment? As with any service procedure, pros and cons exist:

Pros

In developing this program you unify the thinking of company personnel around service goals and procedures. The service commitment itself draws considerable customer attention to your service efforts. It acts as a daily reminder to all personnel. The result can be valuable differentiation from your competition. Well-written, the service commitment sets clear service expectations with buyers and measurable targets for staff performance.

Cons

The cons include the amount of time needed to develop the materials. Many firms are surprised when discussions reveal that key personnel have opposite views on how things should be done and a wide range of misunderstandings on how they are done. Although these misunderstandings are uncomfortable, resolving them is better for the long term. Once consensus is reached, the cost of printed materials must be faced. Time, energy, cost--investing in a service image is significant--but then so is the return.

A few customers will turn your written service commitment into a weapon: ***If service is so important to you people, why can't I get a change order without an administrative fee? ...my delivery date moved up 3 weeks? ...a drainage swale that's never wet? ...a replacement tree just two years after move-in?*** Many builders hear such questions without using a service commitment. If a customer is intent on being difficult, he or she will find a way with or without your help.

As customers continue to send their loud and clear message that they want more and better service, companies are responding. The changing expectations of buyers demand an organized service system that unites your company for the effort. This approach is one response to that need.

Figure 1

Service Commitment

our 20 Point Customer Loyalty Program

1. Find information conveniently during construction and after move-in with our ***Builder Homeowner Guide***
2. Select from dozens of features to personalize your new home using our ***Popular Selections List***
3. Coordinate your new home selections with confidence by taking advantage of our ***Interior Design Appointment***
4. Understand the building process by attending a ***Preconstruction Conference*** to meet with your builder
5. Avoid administrative fees for change orders by following our ***Change Orders Welcome Schedule***
6. Enjoy the undivided attention of our personnel at scheduled ***On-site Construction Reviews***
7. Stay informed about the status of your home and target delivery date with our ***Delivery Date Updates***
8. Plan the final details of your move with confidence based on our ***45-Day Letter*** which sets a firm delivery date
9. Prevent last minute surprises with a ***Preclosing Conference Call*** you receive from your sales counselor
10. Learn how your new home works and confirm we delivered on our promises with our ***New Home Orientation***
11. Preserve your investment by following our ***Caring for Your Home*** guidelines for maintenance and warranty
12. Easily perform minor corrections needed as a result of moving in with your home ***Touch-Up Kit***
13. Stay on top of routine maintenance with our ***Seasonal Reminders*** which arrive in your mail box in Spring and Fall.
14. Feel secure about the quality of your purchase, backed by our ***Builder Limited Warranty***
15. Understand your limited warranty coverage by reviewing our user-friendly, written ***Warranty Standards***
16. Enjoy your new home knowing we will contact you to ask if you have items at ***60-Day Warranty Service***
17. Obtain normal adjustments and review maintenance when our technician visits for our ***Year-End Tune-Up***
18. In a new-home emergency, obtain prompt response through our ***24-Hour Emergency Response Line***
19. Communicate directly to our company president with our ***Presidential Post Card*** for unusual situations

From Carol Smith, Home Address

cjsmithhomeaddress.com

20. Tell us how we did--your evaluation is through our *Customer Comments* surveys