



An Agricultural Retailer's Guide to  
*Customer Care*





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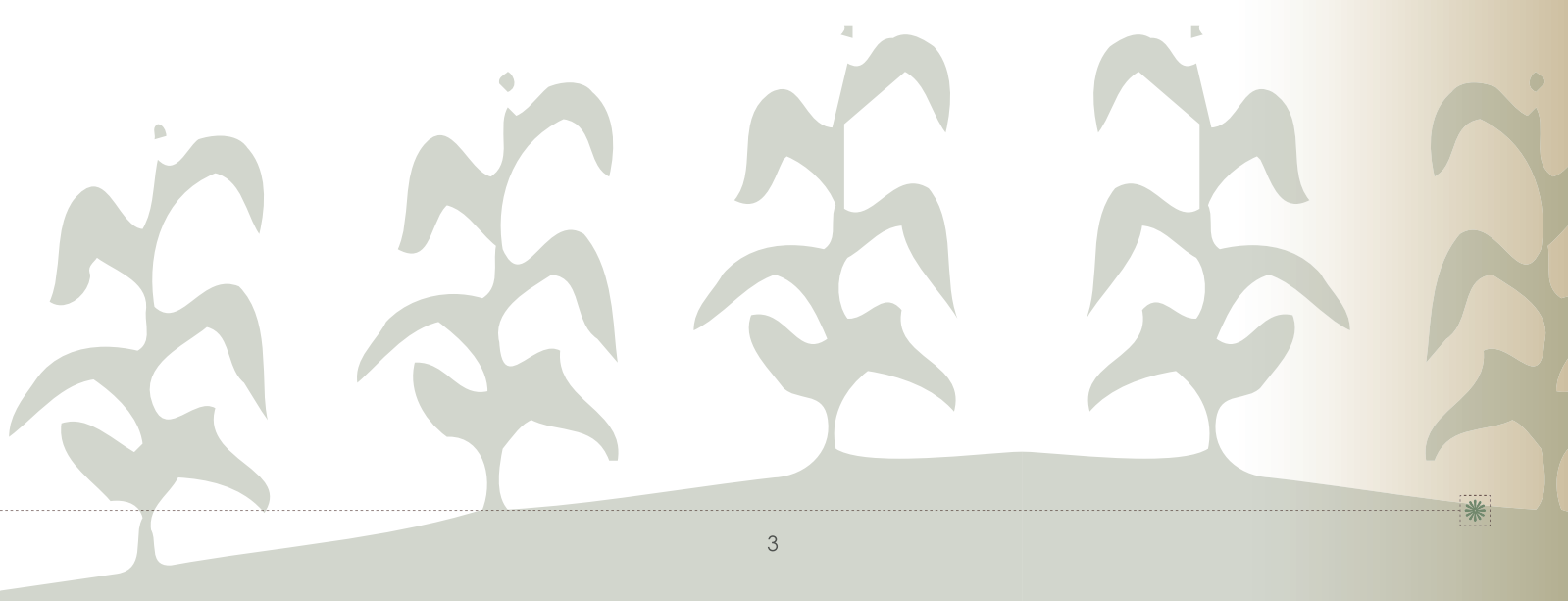
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## A RETAILER'S LINK TO *Profitable* CUSTOMERS

**A**gricultural retailers walk a fine line. On the one side, they need to be extensions of their customers' farming operations and help those customers be profitable. On the other side, retailers must keep their eyes on their own profits. The recommendations, products, and services that ag retailers provide must translate into value for growers who plow them back into the land.

To be successful, ag retailers must know what their customers want. It is important to remember that growers do business with retailers who:

- Understand their world
- Help them make a profit
- Provide meaningful advice
- Inform them on price changes (whether up or down)
- Deliver timely responses
- Offer grid sampling and variable rate technology applications
- Supply quality products
- Provide necessary services
- Offer competitive prices

Yet, the retailer-grower relationship is not a one-way street. Ag retailers survive and thrive by virtue of repeat business from their growers. In turn, that repeat business provides the capital retailers need to make investments in updating rolling stock, providing new technologies, improving facilities, training current employees, retaining experienced employees, and recruiting new employees.

Growers want progressive, future-focused retailers to help them understand new products, services, and opportunities that may benefit their overall farming operations. The ag retailer is, in many ways, the crystal ball to the grower's future. Products are products and services are services; but retailers who can evaluate and effectively communicate what are the "best" products, services, and operations are priceless. And only by constantly improving all aspects of their operations can retailers offer growers the latest advancements in crop production.

Ag retailers who fail to adapt to the changing agricultural landscape increase the probability that they will lose important clients to local competitors, or watch growers add employees to replace the retailers. In today's world, customers can also readily be lost to Internet suppliers, or to an ever-widening circle of competitors who offer similar products and services.

In this competitive atmosphere, the challenge for ag retailers is not simply to adapt to change, but to become exceptional retailers. The need to "out retail" the competition comes from running one's retail business better and providing more value to customers, not simply reacting to change. Successful ag retailers must provide win-win solutions for growers in order to be profitable *today* and in the *future*.





*Agricultural retailers must help growers make the best decisions possible,  
drawing upon their years of experience and the latest science.*



## THE FACE OF THE COMPANY IS *You*

**T**oday's fertilizer, seed, and pesticides are quality products that work. Ag retailers move these low-margin products at high volumes — dry fertilizer by the rail load; fuel by the tank; liquid fertilizer by the rail, barge, and tanker; seed through bulk delivery; and application by the acre. Growers typically see these agricultural inputs as “commodities,” usually without significant differences among them.

Why then, do growers select one retailer over another if everyone is selling the same products? Ag retailers make a mistake if they think popular product lines or lower prices are the main reasons growers do business with them. While it is true that many retailers offer products their competitors don't, proprietary products make up only a small portion of their sales — albeit more profitable sales.

If retailers really believe their success is tied to being the retailer of choice, then they must develop strategies that focus on customer service, on-time delivery, and offering new technologies. Once they develop such strategies, retailers must communicate (and deliver) on these areas at every customer touch point.

It's true that all ag retailers have to price their products and services competitively. It is also true that growers might be able to purchase particular products for less from another retailer. However, there is probably little difference between two competitors' prices when the expenses for a year's crop are totaled. If pricing were that important, there would be fewer ag retailers competing for growers' business.



*Growers look for advice that will increase yields and improve their bottom lines.*

Some growers do business with retailers knowing they may not be paying the absolute lowest price for a given product or service, and growers will occasionally question retailers on price when they believe they are not getting value.

So what is value?







*You represent the company. A good attitude and smile are always a winning combination with customers.*



The concept of value is difficult to determine — it is not a simple mathematical formula. Growers' perceptions of value are based on the sum total of what they get and feel about a retailer. Ag retailers must define strategically the value their growers get for doing business with them. Growers develop loyalty for their retailers as long as they believe they are getting value. It does not take many conversations across the farm fence for growers to switch to other retailers based on all the “bells and whistles” their neighbors say that they get from the competition.



Growers must realize value. They must know and feel they are getting more value for their operations from a product or service than what they are actually paying for. What added value means is different for each grower. One grower may value in field problem-solving skills, while another may find it in timely delivery. Other customers may appreciate the tools and information provided on a website and through daily e-mail communication. For others, value might be agronomic knowledge, picture-perfect applications, and the accurate accounting practices their retailers can provide.



*For many growers, value comes from retailers who work with them in the field.*

The best way ag retailers can provide value to customers is through their employees.

Many growers do business with a retailer based on individual employees — “I know you guys are always close in price, but I really like doing business with you, Joe.” There are countless examples when growers want, ask for, and expect a specific applicator, agronomist, bookkeeper, driver, or marketing professional to help with their operations.

Customers get concerned if the person they typically do business with is unavailable. For example, a grower can get uncomfortable if a company sprayer shows up in their field and the regular driver is not in the seat. Or, growers may get concerned if they come to pay a bill and find the person sitting at the front desk isn't Sue who knows the customer's patron splits, fields, and normal payment method.





In one situation, a grower was told that he was going to be doing business with another branch of the same retailer due to a branch closing. The grower's concern was not the change itself, but who would be post-spraying his crops.

"What about my applicator?" the grower asked. "Will he still be able to spray for me?"

The grower asked essentially the same question five different times during a brief conversation with the agronomist. But for that grower, the face of the company was the applicator.

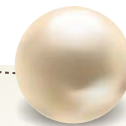
It is easy to understand why growers place such confidence in individuals at a retail location. Even if there are others at the branch who can provide the same services, customers want specific people to custom apply crop nutrients and crop production products, provide agronomic advice, deliver fuel, walk fields, or diagnose field problems.

For these growers, it is a specific individual (rather than the company) who helps them determine site-specific nutrient recommendations for N, P, K, and lime, or who reviews yield maps for information to help improve decisions. Thus, growers' business relationships often rely on their personal relationships with employees — with Mike, Jill, Bill, or Barbara — not their relationships with the manager or owner alone.

Those relationships continue as long as customers have confidence the retailers' employees are providing outstanding service. *Every* person on the retailer's staff should feel an obligation to develop and nurture relationships with their customers. As long as each employee who interacts with growers provides *excellent customer service at a fair price at all times*, customers will have no reason to change retailers.



*Even small things, like helping to load a grower's vehicle, can have a big impact on bringing customers back.*



*Pearl of Wisdom*

*Provide excellent customer service at a fair price at all times.*

That's why the relationships between growers and the entire staff are so important for good customer relations, improved customer sales, and customer satisfaction and retention. It might be an overused cliché, but people like doing business with people they like and trust.



## COMPANY RESOURCES ALLOW EMPLOYEES TO *Deliver* ON PROMISES

Growers see their local ag retail branches as the places they use to purchase crop inputs and ask agronomic advice. Growers consider the employees of their local branches as their “pit crews,” whether they are working at the branch, in the field, or at a local restaurant.

Growers can name *the farm team* from their retailer — the branch manager, agronomist, secretary, delivery person, and applicators. But an ag retailer’s name on the door of a truck is less important than the local employees the growers do business with. A majority of growers are not concerned about their retailers’ upper management at headquarters either, or even who serves on the governing board (for the most part) as long as they receive good service and attention from their local branch and its employees.

The employees at a branch connect the business to the growers. Ag retailers must provide the support to allow those relationships to develop, prosper, and advance. Conversely, great employees will fail if companies cannot deliver on what they promise. The background roles of ag retail companies are to provide the resources and support that allow local employees to make good on promises.

The theoretical foundation for supporting employees is simple: satisfied employees who can satisfy customers are easily motivated to satisfy customers.

But this is much more than just theory. In practice, the relationship between growers and retailers has to translate into work orders for retailers to stay in business. Retailers *must invest a portion of their yearly receipts* to keep pace with a changing world and shifting grower expectations.

Important investments retailers must make include:

- Upgrading rolling stock
- Purchasing and adopting improved technology
- Upgrading the facility and making other capital improvements
- Complying with local, state, and federal regulations
- Upgrading employee skills through training and educational programs
- Accounting for operating costs such as employee salaries, benefits, and insurance
- Providing employees with trucks, cell phones, laptop computers, and other tools of the trade
- Providing compensation to remain competitive at recruiting and retaining quality employees







*Ag retailers must be able to provide the products and equipment their employees promise to deliver.*



# A SOPHISTICATED, EDUCATED, AND DEMANDING *Customer*

**E**ach succeeding generation of growers is better prepared than the one before. Their progress is due, in large measure, to having access to tools that their predecessors would never have dreamed possible. Sophisticated and powerful tools allow growers to take their farms to the next level of profitable production.

Examples of tools that have revolutionized farming include:

- Global positioning and field mapping, which allows within field, site-specific recommendations and applications for crop nutrients, seed placement, and field improvements
- High-yielding, genetically enhanced seeds
- Assisted-steering equipment, which allows more precise placement of fertilizers and crop protection products, as well as reduced overlap and more efficient use of these products
- Access to online information
- An ag retail industry that is better educated, experienced, and skilled

These same tools allow ag retailers to offer custom solutions to their customers' problems. Working with growers, however, is more than just having a technology or service to deliver. Only by understanding growers' expectations will retailers be able to succeed at providing products and services that will retain the growers as long-term business partners. The ability to understand expectations also attracts new clients.

Here are some things about growers that retailers should always remember.

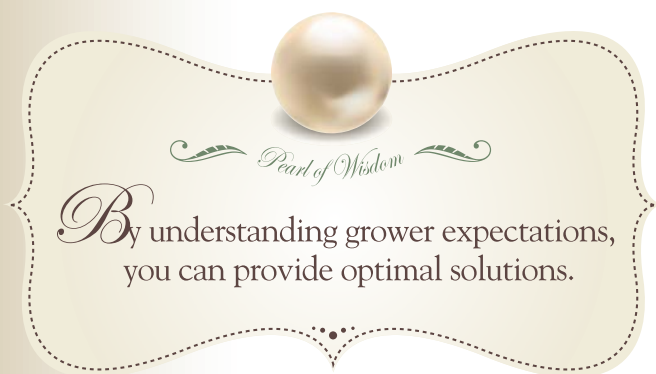
## **Growers Want to Be Treated Like They Are Your Only Customer**

Growers expect their ag retailers to be intimately familiar with their farming operations, management styles, and personal preferences. These growers are not impressed by employees who need to ask questions like, "Refresh my memory. Which product did you use? What type of fertilizer did you want? Where is that field? How many acres do you farm? Who sprayed the field the last time?"

To be successful, retailers must understand what growers are talking about even when they bring up the most obscure parts of their farming operations, particular fields, or unique problems.

As one successful retailer observed, "I feel like I can walk on their farm and it's almost like walking onto my family farm. I know that operation."

This kind of intimacy with growers might explain why growers prefer to have the same person from the retailer service their operations.







*Retailers must keep up with new technologies to offer new services to growers. Educational programs provide retailers with the latest in scientific information and technologies that help them serve their customers.*







*Keeping detailed records allows retailers to base their advice to growers on past performance and experience.*

In today's information-intensive agribusiness, retailers must keep track of their customers' complex needs and interests. To keep track, many retailers use databases that contain customer information. Databases may include information about pests, fertility, purchase histories, decision-making processes, preferences, and future business plans.

Associates should put information about products, services, family details, and anything they think is interesting into the database. When a customer calls in to the branch, that information will be the foundation the retailer can use to make decisions about what to recommend or how best to work with the grower.

The most effective databases also should be accessible by a PDA (personal digital assistant) or laptop computer so workers can review information as they pull into a customer's driveway. Practical information systems can help associates be prepared for their interactions with growers.



*Growers are a very diverse group — each individual is slightly different than the next.*



*Give growers your undivided attention. Listening closely tells growers you are interested in them.*



### **Growers Want to Believe You Have Their Best Interests in Mind**

Solid business relationships with growers mean they know you have their best interests in mind.

In complex farm businesses, time is of the essence. Retailers must work hard to be prepared for each interaction with their growers, and they serve growers best by making appointments before stopping by. Being prepared demonstrates an understanding, respect, and appreciation for the customer's business. By always being prepared and bringing information and ideas, customers will grow to appreciate that retailers are more than friends, they are business partners who care about their customers' success.

It can take a long time for growers to gain that level of trust with a retailer's employees, but it can take only a minute to lose that trust by not being prepared. It is also important to know who will value "drop ins" and who won't.

### **Growers Want You to Give Them Your Best Opinions**

Growers expect to be told when you occasionally disagree with them. Growers need to know all of the possible options, potential outcomes, and likely costs so they can make the best decisions for their operations.



*Growers expect to be told when you occasionally disagree with them.*







Retailers might need to provide special training to help employees or sales associates understand how to present opposing points of view and even disagreeable information in ways that convince growers that the resulting decisions are in their best interests and that maintain relationships.

### **Growers Want You to be On-call for Them**

Grower purchases drive business, so by extension, a retailer's employees work for customers as well. Increasing equipment size, advancing technology, and hiring employees have allowed growers to become more efficient in their operations. They are farming more acres and covering much larger geographical areas than their predecessors.

This increased efficiency places additional demands and challenges on retailers to provide timely responses. "Service-on-demand," whether day, night, or weekend, is an important component in determining whether a larger grower buys all, some, or none of the products from a retailer. Growers who want this premium service expect products and some services to be delivered wherever and whenever they need them.

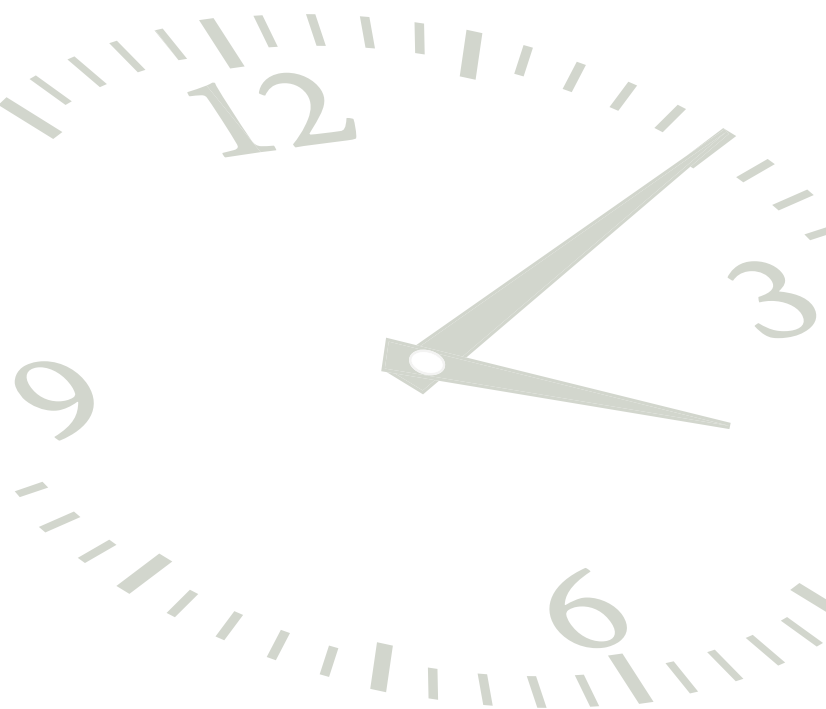
### **Growers Want Your Time to Be Their Time**

Growers expect retail employees to work with the growers' schedules, and in some cases, that includes off-hours.



*Growers expect their retailers to resolve any problems quickly and fairly.*





Flexibility is key. An agronomist might have to meet a grower at 6 a.m. and another at 6 p.m. The same kind of schedule might apply to delivering products to the farm. Progressive retailers hire staff members who can be accessible 24/7. Successful retailers understand that this flexibility is most important for the top 20 percent of their customers who account for 80 percent of their profits.

Retailers want to fence off these customers from the competition. Providing exceptionally responsive service might just do that.

### **Growers Want to Believe They Are Astute Business Managers**

Today's successful growers feel just as comfortable following grain market trends on their computers as they do working in the fields and repairing equipment. Larger farming operations may even have specific people dedicated to each of those functions.



*Being prepared before you visit growers shows them you are prepared, organized, and won't waste their valuable time.*





*Growers appreciate and value the sound advice that will help them make important decisions about their farming operations.*

Long-term growers understand the costs of production and the expected yields per acre to be profitable and support their lifestyles. The days of checkbook accounting — when growers deposited the grain check in the bank, paid their bills, and based their success on whether there was money left in the account by December 31 — are no longer sustainable.

Today's growers expect to understand the returns that an investment in a particular piece of equipment or input will provide. Those returns might be based on dollars and cents — for example, increased yields that more than pay for the cost of the input, or an equipment investment that allows a customer to plant faster and take advantage of

the increased yields often associated with earlier planting.

However, the returns might be less tangible, such as having crops stand longer in the field, which spreads the harvest over more days. Being advisers to growers means that retailers must demonstrate their value in what they deliver for the growers, and what retailers must deliver to enhance the growers' business management.

### **Growers Want to Believe They Are Self-reliant**

Growers are less dependent on ag retailers for information than they once were. Today's growers are better educated and more up-to-date within their operations.



In the past, many growers relied on ag retailers for that year's farm evaluation and changes in production programs for next year's crop. Growers asked and took what the retailers offered with few arguments or questions. Growers purchased products based on trust and past performance.

Today, ag retailers must be at the forefront of crop production developments in order to help meet grower needs. For this reason, retailers must attend every advanced training they can, read trade magazines, go to trade shows about crop production, and always observe product performance in their customers' operations. Successful ag retailers must be at the very edge of what is happening so they have information to bring their customers that is unique and pertinent to an individual grower's business goals.



### **Growers Want Your Recommendations to Have Positive Results**

Most growers still rely on their local ag retailers to deliver products even if they are slightly more expensive than going to pick them up. But growers also want competitively priced products.

Remember that price *plus* service and information before and after the sale is important. Ag retailers earn money from selling products. Growers earn money from using the right rates of the right products in the right places at the right times based on sound recommendations from the right ag retailers.

It can be difficult working with some growers (maybe even somewhat unrealistic), who feel that achieving successful results nine out of ten times is not good enough. However, growers want to know conclusively that their money is well spent. If customers can rely on a retailer for reliable and consistent results, then the conversation about price is not quite as important. Reaching this point with growers means that the retailer's team of employees has sold their customers on value, quality service, and agronomic knowledge beyond the price of a jug of oil, bag of insecticide, or load of fertilizer.

*Retailers need to know the latest research and communicate that knowledge to their customers.*







*Each grower wants something a little different from his or her retailer. Retailers must be able to know what those needs are.*

### **Growers Want a Personal Touch**

What retailers want to hear from their growers is, “You gave me something that I can’t get from the other place.”

That “something extra” is different for each grower. It might be state-of-the-art application, a reliable operator, or help in decision-making.

Most people believe spraying a field is fairly simple because assisted steering allows the sprayer to drive straight while the boom automatically goes up and down and shuts off in the overlap area. If you listen to some, all the driver does is eat and listen to music. However, new sprayer and spreader technology is complex. Not just anyone can be put in the driver’s seat, and it is important to communicate that expertise to growers — as well as the expertise involved in any service.



*Retailers must explain the expertise required to operate complex equipment.*





Truly professional applicators know grower expectations are different, and spraying for one grower can be quite different from spraying for another. For the applicator, service might mean knowing that a grower wants the fencerow nozzle turned on or off, or it could mean that the grower expects the applicator be able to tell the grower the condition of the crop after the application.

Each customer's expectations are different. Some customers may take pride in maintaining beautiful homesteads with picture-perfect fields — the roadsides along their fields are mowed, weeds around fence posts sprayed, and every corn plant perfectly spaced. For such customers, successful retailers know to keep the truck on the lanes and to leave the fields the same way they entered. It's these personal touches that keep applicators coming back to these farms and the customers doing business with the same retailers.

### **Growers Want Retailers Who Are Active in Their Communities**

Growers want to see their local branch employees actively working in their communities. Growers appreciate when their retailers donate to 4-H, FFA, the Soil and Water Conservation District, Cooperative Extension Service, and youth programs.



Growers want to know their ag retailers have local employees who contribute to or volunteer in the community. Working within the community also provides opportunities to develop relationships that will lead to future business. Retailers never know when a positive first impression may lead to a sale.

*Growers want to see their retailers supporting their communities, such as participating in 4-H projects at county fairs.*





# **CUSTOMER** *Allegiance* **IS BUILT ON PEAK PERFORMANCE AND OUTSTANDING CUSTOMER CARE**

**A**n ag retailer has a fundamental choice between being a vending machine or a retailer who adds value.

If retailers choose to be vending machines they should not be surprised if they lose market share or if customers try to find the lowest price elsewhere. The only thing a vending machine has going for it is location. Ag retailers are successful when they add value, the growers see the value, and they are willing to pay more than the vending machine version.

focus shifts — they concentrate less on how much product they sell to individual growers and more on what products best fit an individual grower's farming operation.

That means the products and services retailers may sell to one grower will not be the same products they sell to another. Retailers must consider each new product or service and evaluate whether it is suitable for each individual customer's operation. Successful retailers cannot take a "one size fits all" approach.

Once retailers understand that customer allegiance is built on performance and customer care, then they can begin to implement efforts to improve both sides of the customer allegiance equation. Service can be great, but if products don't perform satisfactorily, then customers will go elsewhere. And if customers feel employees don't care, growers will take their business elsewhere even if their current retailers have products that perform well and are priced right.

Here are some things about their own operations that retailers should always remember.



As a comparison, consider a large paper cup filled with water. If there is a hole in the cup (a lost customer) a retailer can control the leak pretty easily by adding new water. But what if the holes keep on coming (or the retailer keeps losing customer after customer)? The ability to replace these customers becomes very difficult.

Successfully selling products and servicing growers requires retailers to have more personal interaction with each customer. The retailers'

## **Company Image Is More Than Words on Paper**

A retail company's culture — or personality — is evident in its brand. A brand is a combination of emotions and expectations people feel. It's what a business stands for. It's what people think of when they see its trucks, its logo on workers' sleeves, its business sign on the road, or the company's advertisement in the local paper.





*Keeping customers up-to-date is a key to keeping them satisfied.*





To make a successful brand “come to life,” employees have to live the brand every day. And living the brand starts at the top.

Upper management must convey their business philosophy to all employees whether full-time, seasonal, or part-time. And employees must understand the company’s goals, mission, and vision. Employees perform best when they believe they work for a company that does what it promises. A successful company culture leads to successful behaviors and performances by its employees.

Management must communicate the company’s mission and vision to customers and employees at every opportunity — on brochures, flyers, online, everywhere. Retailers should ask themselves, “If I had to engrave what I stand for on a two-ton rock in front of my entrance, what would it say?” When retailers can do this, they can easily and clearly communicate their company’s vision to their customers and employees.

Growers can tell when employees feel positive about their employers, are passionate about what they do for a living, and enjoy the opportunity to deliver solutions to both simple and complex problems. And when employees are engaged like this, customers are more likely to come back.



*While products and services are important, the individual who delivers the product or service matters to most growers.*

Quite simply, a company’s employees make the difference between whether:

- Customers stay or leave
- Retail stores thrive or close
- Businesses achieve good returns on investment or barely hang on



*A retailer’s brand is more than colorful advertizing on a truck door. A brand includes what customers and employees think of when they see a company’s name or logo.*





*Many retailers have corporate offices, but they should never forget that growers want to know their retailers are just down the road.*

### Retailers Want to Feel Local

Growers don't necessarily need their retailers to be headquartered locally, but they do need the employees to be accessible. That's what ag retailers accomplish by having local branches and local employees. Local employee teams successfully represent an entire organization even if headquarters is 100 miles away.

One of the quickest ways retailers lose their local advantage is to blame their corporate offices for why they can't do something — "We would like to do this, but, the head shed will not let us" or, "I would give you another price, but headquarters set the price. It's out of my hands."

What growers hear is that the corporate office makes decisions about them from 100 miles away. Retailers need to keep their decisions local or make it appear that they are local without mentioning the corporate office.



*Customers really appreciate retailers who let them know that their business is valued and appreciated.*

Another way for retailers to develop local reputations is to participate in volunteer projects or donate money or resources in the communities they serve. Retailers can be active at the 4-H fair, judge or help serve at dinners, participate in school and church activities, and even coach local sports teams. Donating to worthy local causes and offering opportunities such as college scholarships help growers know the good work a retailer's employees are doing for the community on the company's behalf.



*Working with the local community — such as working with your local fire department — shows your commitment to your community's well being.*





*Providing high-quality fuel to the farm is just as important as applying fertilizer, spraying weeds, or analyzing soil samples. Every member of a retailer's team contributes to the grower's overall impression.*

### **One Department Can Affect Another**

Retailers who are diversified across many businesses — grain, fuel, seed, feed, fertilizer, and pesticides — have strengths, but also vulnerabilities. For example, if a grower becomes dissatisfied with a fuel representative, that may affect the fertilizer or chemical side of the business.

Fuel and fertilizers might be two different departments, but the performance of one can have positive or negative repercussions on the other. For that reason, it is critical for diversified companies to communicate and follow one clearly defined mission.

### **Product Availability Is Important**

Customers come to retail outlets for products they expect to find in stock. In-stock products are one of the most important merchandise issues ag retailers face. Retailers should never underestimate the need to have their most profitable merchandise in stock and available.

*Keeping popular products on-hand during the busy season allows growers to work uninterrupted during planting and harvesting.*

Of course, it can be difficult to stock every product. If retailers do not have a particular product, they need to offer a similar product with detailed instructions on how to use it. Alternatively, retailers can look for that product at a neighboring branch and have an employee pick it up and deliver it. Some in-season products can be ordered and picked up the same day or delivered the next.




## Growers Want to Do Business With Professional and Successful People

First impressions are important to customers. Growers prefer clean facilities, late model trucks, and the latest technology. Retail facilities that are in disrepair imply that their business practices will be similar.

Consider for a moment what a customer sees when they enter a retail office. Is it organized to efficiently serve the customer? Is literature available and dust-free to explain various products, programs, and services? How frequently are the materials on the wall updated? Are they attractively displayed?

There is nothing wrong with older equipment that is well maintained. Taking good care of equipment conveys a message that the retail facility will take care of growers and their needs. It is a very positive reflection of tender drivers and the companies they work for when they clean up dirty equipment before going to a customer's field. Clean, functioning equipment conveys professionalism to growers.



*Pearl of Wisdom*

*K*now the grower in order to give more personalized solutions.

## Each Grower Is Unique

Progressive ag retailers recognize the more they know about each grower, the more personalized the solutions become, and the more difficult it will be for customers to switch to competitors. While admirable for building long-term relationships, this type of personalized service



*Pearl of Wisdom*

Growers want to do business with professionals & successful people.

has dramatically changed and possibly complicated how retailers interact with their grower clients.

The old way of sending any employee to the farm no longer works like it did just a few years ago. Instead, retailers are dedicating specific employees to specific farms who can learn the “ins and outs” of that particular operation and intimately understand what a grower expects.

Many ag retailers have business meetings with their key growers. These meetings include other staff members including the agronomist, seed expert, technology expert, and application expert. All are involved in planning next year's crop for the customer.

It's important to know the growers' strengths and weaknesses, because any success with them requires retailers to be well versed in those areas. Playing to a grower's strength is not a sales gimmick; it simply makes it easier to build relationships. When retailers start with things that appeal to their growers, it may open other possibilities of working in other areas of their operations and create new sales opportunities.







*Whether a grower has 500 acres or 5,000 doesn't matter when you are speaking with him or her.*

### **Some Growers Are More Important than Others**

It's true that there are key growers that retail outlets depend on to remain profitable. While these key growers may represent 20 percent of the customer base, they might account for 80 percent of sales. The business of these loyal customers keeps the doors open, lights on, employees paid, and equipment replaced.

That doesn't mean that traditional or small farms are unimportant — in fact, such operations tend to be more loyal. It just means that some large customers contribute more to the suppliers' revenue or profits. In addition to their own business, key growers are often (though not always) influential in their communities. Suppliers who take good care of key customers

may find that there are benefits to working with the network of other growers the key customers work with. Good suppliers know that maintaining healthy relationships with both traditional and key customers is good business.

A retailer's profitability takes a significant hit when a major part or all of a key grower's purchases are lost to a competitor. Ag retailers have learned to give key growers their full attention, better pricing from purchasing larger volumes, and quicker service to maintain satisfaction. Retailers may offer key customers new products at no charge to test on their farms,

*Retailers can reach out to key customers by providing them with more access to expert advice and information.*





provide them with more regular agronomic updates through newsletters, offer early purchasing opportunities, or provide them with more experts to work with.

The orders and the revenues these customers generate are quite important to the overall health of the local ag retailer and can make the difference between a great year and an average one.

### **Everyone Was Small at One Time**

Agricultural retailers have net profits between 10 and 15 percent, meaning that every dollar's worth of sales is significant. No customer's order is too small or acreage too insignificant. These small orders often become larger orders as individual growers expand their operations or move some or all of their purchases from other retailers. It is really rewarding to see your small- and mid-scale growers expand to have large-scale operations.

There are some growers who think that because they farm thousands of acres, they should have the best deals when it comes to product pricing and delivery of services. That's true in many respects, but ag retailers have other responsibilities to smaller growers. It is important to make these smaller growers feel their business is appreciated and valued.

The agricultural industry still includes many small growers. They are often part-time growers who are unable to expand their operations due to finances, time, or lack of equipment. It is



*Treat every customer (large and small) with respect. You never know when they might start sending more work orders your way.*

important to know there are no longer enough of these small operations to build an entire business around; however, retailers can definitely do very well serving them.

Whenever possible, it is important to provide smaller operations the same level of service as the bigger ones. Unfortunately, these smaller growers can be more demanding for the total dollars they bring in. Still, providing this level of service can help a retailer earn the reputation as a company that delivers what it promises. Even so, ag retailers must not discount services or fees if they can't be justified.

Smaller growers may not have much time because they also have off-farm employment. In such cases, retailers ought to keep these growers' crop production plans as simple as possible. Offer fair and reasonable products and services. They're businesspeople who understand the retailer will deliver a service as fairly and competitively as possible.





### Every Employee Is Selling Something

Agricultural retailers typically do not have large advertising budgets. Instead, they count on employees to be walking advertisements. For that reason, every employee (from the CEO to the field applicator) must deliver outstanding service to satisfy growers. This can make or break a business.

Ag retailers earn their business at every encounter. Employees must know that they are selling something every day — whether products, services, or the company brand. It's important to know that employees who are not involved in sales can win or lose growers as quickly as an agronomist who makes recommendations or an applicator who spreads lime.

*Retail employees have to earn and retain a grower's business with every encounter.*

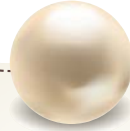


Every person who comes in contact with customers directly or indirectly — from the person who answers the phone at the office all the way to the person who visits the farm — contributes positively or negatively to a grower's perception of the retail organization. Those perceptions reinforce to growers why they are doing business with the particular branch location.



*Every retail employee, whether working directly or indirectly with growers, contributes to customer retention.*

*Pearl of Wisdom*  
**K**now that you are always selling products, services and the company brand.



*Pearl of Wisdom*

*It takes time to earn a customer's  
business & loyalty.*

People behind the counter can make or break a deal. Think about a receptionist who can recognize a customer's voice on the phone and make that customer feel welcomed. Then, consider the receptionist who is less than pleasant. One poor call can set a negative tone for the next contact or maybe the entire season. In some cases, customers will not want to call at all, because they dread talking to a particular office person.

Think about the positive or negative impact of the employees who take soil samples, bring product to farms, or applicators who spray products across a field. Imagine a mechanic (wearing the company shirt) who talks badly about the company at a local coffee shop. What opinions will growers have when the retailers' equipment breaks down on their farms? What will growers think when the e-mails or letters that retailers send them contain typos or misspell their names? What happens when their phone calls to retailers don't get answered for days?

These examples of very simple customer contacts play a significant role in influencing a grower's perceptions. Like it or not, every employee is linked to every other employee — and collectively, they can increase sales or lose opportunities. Every day, retailers have the opportunity to earn a customer's business and provide them a reason to continue doing business.

### **Selling Beyond the Price**

Growers, like other business owners, always focus on their bottom lines. However, customers who focus on the bottom line don't necessarily want to buy the cheapest products. If retailers can show growers where additional costs can make economic sense, then there is a good chance of persuading customers to follow more costly recommendations.

It takes time to earn customers' business and loyalty. While the process can start with a bag of seed, an herbicide minibulk shuttle, or pallet of insecticide, gaining a grower's confidence and loyalty may take several interactions over a season or a few years.



*Building customer loyalty takes time.  
Providing growers with the latest information  
is a powerful tool.*







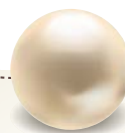
For instance, many growers buy their own sprayers thinking they can spray just as easily as custom applicators. Unfortunately, many growers discover that spraying their weeds two weeks too late cost them yield. They may have saved several dollars per acre in application fees, but because of their other responsibilities kept them from applying at the right time, they may have lost one or two bushels per acre of corn or 1/3 to 1/2 bushel of beans per acre. Successful retailers can sell the value and importance of making timely applications.

Knowing growers is critical in terms of price. Let's say variable rate lime costs \$2 more per ton. One grower might say, "Forget that. I'm not doing that," while another might ask, "Now, how does the variable rate lime help me?" That second grower wants whatever is going to generate the most profits.

Retailers would not take high-end hybrids to customers who only want low-priced products. However, for growers to understand their choices, seed salespeople may need to explain the differences between the high-end and low-end seed products in terms of yield expectations.

Conversely, retailers would never try to sell the less expensive seed corn to growers who want the advantages associated with the more expensive seed. But even with those growers who are willing to spend more, retailers will be hard-pressed to show their customers the value of planting expensive "race horse" hybrids in poor-yielding soils.

If retailers are only interested in selling cheap products, then there is little room to talk about the extra values they can offer such as timely delivery, a modern billing system, or employees familiar with their farms. There are no chances to feature additional benefits, because all such retailers are going to do is deliver cheap products to their customers' farms. If retailers sell value beyond their products, at least growers will understand what they are losing by using price as the sole criterion for making decisions.



*Part of Wisdom*

The best long-term strategy is to achieve short-term goals well.

### **The Long-term Vision Is to Reach Short-term Goals Well**

Success begins with ag retailers viewing growers as business partners and friends. As friends, there is that personal touch when a retail employee sits at a grower's kitchen table to plan next year's crops, deliver fuel, offer price risk-management tools, review product labels at the local branch, and apply crop protection products and fertilizers. Many employees work hard for their growers. The most successful employees are the ones who think long-term beyond the current activity.

To many employees, success isn't just a seed sale, sprayed field, or potash delivery. For these employees, the current sales, no matter how large or small they may be, should lay the groundwork for future sales. The long-term view is many seasons long.

A retailer's long-term vision is to accomplish short-term goals well. It's not just selling a bag of seed. It's following up with growers during the summer to see how the seed is doing, meeting with them later to see how well the seed performed, and then getting ready to take orders for next year.

If retailers can do this for enough years in a row, growers will have enough confidence in their retailers that good service automatically translates into orders. If that's the case, retailers have a good chance of being in business next year, retaining customers, and growing profitability — that's the secret.





*Providing good customer service is a seasonlong effort.*

### **Selling the Team Concept**

There are tremendous advantages for retailers who have customers that rely on their own initiatives, skills, actions, and decision-making.

What never changes year-in and year-out is that growers must:

- Prepare for a crop
- Plant a crop
- Raise a crop
- Protect a crop
- Harvest a crop
- Market the crop

Each of these steps is complicated and technical. The ability of individual growers to be the best grain marketers, price risk managers, input purchasers, agronomists, and applicators takes more time than any one grower can give. It also requires considerable skill to integrate all the components it takes to grow and sell a crop. Growers may have thousands of acres, but they need help to get the most out of their operations.

These days, it seems not a single grower or retail employee can have all of the answers required to grow a crop. It is knowledge and information that ag retailers bring to these self-reliant growers through



*Having the latest information is a powerful tool when working with growers.*

planned business meetings that involve discussions, planning, and proactive plans on their farms.

Along with their specific expertise, individual employees can bring the latest innovations and scientific advances to farms. Successful retailers have dedicated people who focus on one area, research agronomic issues online, read technical agronomic materials, go to educational meetings, and stay informed about what the latest university research shows. These retailers take the time to learn about new crop protection programs and fertility recommendations from many different sources because their livelihoods depend on them.







In fact, it is becoming more common for retailers to have their own research areas where they can test their own recommendations and stay in contact with university extension services. The relationship between retailers and growers can become much stronger when retailers integrate all of their resources and information (from several sources) to solve customers' problems.







*Yield plots in a local service area provide local solutions.*

### **Let Customers Tell You What They Want**

Prior to business meetings, have discussions with growers to set each agenda. Once a meeting starts, bring experts to cover each agenda item, if possible.

Allow some silence when conducting business with growers. Retailers have less success if they don't give growers enough time to tell them what their goals are. What growers want to achieve takes time to sort out, and there are a lot of factors that need to be discussed.

Individual retailers have to aspire to be the one and only company that can fit all of the pieces together to ensure success and profitability for their customers. That can only happen if retailers really listen to what is being said. Better still, before retailers visit growers, they should be thinking about questions they can ask to learn more about the growers' operations. What retailers learn from growers' answers can be invaluable when shared with other retail team members — that way, everyone knows what each grower is trying to accomplish.

Don't be intimidated by growers who think they know everything. What they think they are and what they actually are may be different.

Look at what they do, ask them how they do it, and ask them why they do it. There may be opportunities they may not have considered. If retailers listen closely, they may have opportunities to add value when they perceive weaknesses in a customer's farming operations.

*Taking the time to listen to customers allows retailers to understand what growers want to achieve.*







*A retailer's customer encompasses the entire family.*

### **The Entire Family Is Your Customer**

Retailers often think of growers as the only customers — they agree on terms to purchase seed, feed, or whatever product; and they work with retailers on a regular basis. However, it's a great mistake if a retailer's view of a customer stops with one individual. Each customer almost always has family.

Retailers should never assume that spouses don't make decisions. One of the surest ways to lose business is to say something like, "Is your husband coming in to discuss his seed purchases for next year? I would really like to talk to him rather than having to repeat myself twice, so I would just as soon talk to your husband."



*Never underestimate a spouse's involvement in farm management decisions.*

The role of spouses in managing farms is critically important to know. Spouses may be direct partners, or directly involved in planning operations, managing finances, doing estate planning, and planting crops. On one particular farm, there are three tractors — one each for the husband, wife, and daughter who work collectively



*Understanding customers means that retailers must consider both the husband's and the wife's expectations when offering them advice.*

in their operation. Granted, the husband may be the one who the retailer typically talks to on the phone about crop protection, but his family are active participants when major decisions are being made.

In other cases, spouses keep the books, write the checks, and work off-site. One particular ag retailer invites his customers' spouses and children to a special dinner filled with gifts.

When asked why he does this, the facility manager said, "I want them to know our staff. I want them to know to whom they are writing the checks."

What can happen when a retailer does not treat a grower's family as "the customer"? Here is an example. A retailer invited male customers to a Christmas party and customer appreciation night. "We made the mistake of using a mailing address label printed off with the names of the male growers," the retailer said. "We got more grief from

customers' wives wondering when was the last time we got a check that it did not have their name on it."

Retailers must treat spouses as critical parts of their customers' businesses.

Sons and daughters are equally as important as spouses. Fathers and mothers may be loyal customers, but their children may not have fully developed those relationships with retailers.

A child who is a college graduate and may have taken a course about purchasing, might say, "I don't know why you keep buying from that retailer. They don't have the lowest price."

The parent should be able to say, "I understand your concern, but I get more value from using them beyond their prices. They bring more to the table in help improve our operation than their low-price competitors. Over the years they have been able to increase my yields more than what little extra I am paying for the products. We make money off their recommendations."

The children may not sign the checks or make the decisions today, but they will in the future. And if a retailer is not careful, that next



*Just because their parents have been customers for many years does not automatically mean that children will remain loyal to their parents' retailers.*







*Retailers should view the parent as today's customer and the son or daughter as tomorrow's.*

*Pearl of Wisdom*  
*Don't take a grower's children or family for granted.*

generation will move to another retailer. This is why retailers must continue selling their value even to loyal customers.

Do not take any customer for granted. Assume that the son or daughter who comes in is the customer, even if the parents have not made retirement plans. In fact, some retailers target specific programs for the next generation of growers to make sure their companies are known to these younger growers as they take more active roles in family farming operations.

In complex operations, some family farms even extend beyond the traditional family members who are part of the day-to-day operations. On-staff agronomists, landowners, even others in the community may have concerns about the

purchases a particular farm makes. The definition of family farm today may extend to a whole host of people who share concerns about what goes in the ground or on the plants in a complex farm business.

### **Don't Waste a Customer's Time**

Many people are constantly asking for producers' time. If they gave everybody just a little bit of time, their days would be wasted answering phones, filling out surveys, and making and attending appointments.

*Don't waste a grower's time in the spring when time is so short and the work unending.*





A grower who plans to be operating years from now must have a business approach to farming. They don't want to waste their time on people who visit them for no reason. Time is a precious commodity. Respect it. The challenge for retailers is to provide value in every communication they have with growers. When retailers spend time with customers, it should be quality time.

Always try to set up appointments. This ensures both grower and retailer are more prepared.

### **You Are the Professional Adviser, So Tell Them What You Think Is Best**

A grower may ask a retailer how a particular product performs for burning down weeds in the fall. The agronomist could say, "That product works well as a burndown." But what a grower would rather hear is, "That's really good stuff, but the residual control it provides will not control giant ragweed and lambsquarters as well as other products next spring."

A general rule of sales is not to portray the differences between products or services in negative terms. With growers, it's not about the one-time sale. Retailers definitely want to build business relationships on trust and respect. When retailers talk about products or services, they should talk about their strengths along with their weaknesses.

If retailers want to build long-term business relationships, they are going to have those conversations at some point. If customers are surprised when something happens that does not meet their expectations, retailers may lose those customers, or the event may create questions about the retailers' integrity, even if it is out of their control.



*Be there when growers need your help. Making time in your busy schedule to help a grower in a crisis may be the most important thing you can do to maintain customer loyalty.*

For instance, a retailer might sell a grower a high-yielding hybrid, but the hybrid has a built-in problem of not standing up as well as other hybrids in a dry year. Early on, the retailer should discuss with the grower the benefits of higher yields and the risk of poor plant standability — that's the time to do it, not when the grower calls from the third field trying to pick up downed corn.

Retailers need to build their customers' confidence that what the retailers tell them is the best information they have available. Then, leave it up to the growers to make the final decisions based on the presented facts.





## **The Internet Creates Conversations Between Growers and Retailers**

At one time, there was an unrealistic concern that growers would buy almost all of their products and services online. That still may be on the horizon, but at this point, growers use the Internet for price discovery, product knowledge, and research results. Fortunately, growers still like to do business with people close to home who they like and trust.

## **Getting Part of the Farm Is Better Than Having None of It**

Retailers should work their products in slowly. It may take years to build trust with customers. Agricultural retailers may not be able to sell growers all of their needs, but they can sell those services (soil sampling, timely applications, detailed accounting) and alternative products and programs that can help add profitability to their operations.

Some growers have the financial means and transportation equipment to purchase, haul, and store large quantities

of crop protection products, seed, fuel, and fertilizer directly from wholesale distributors. They may be pleased they save some money by purchasing inputs directly, but fail to update their rates per acre to reflect soil characteristics or newer agronomic practices.

An agronomist might find from soil sampling that one of these growers doesn't need 150 pounds of potash per acre. Instead, the agronomist may suggest the money would be better spent applying 100 pounds of potash mixed with zinc. In this case, the retailer tests the soils and analyzes results. The retailer hopes to get the sale of the zinc the grower needs or the next product or service the customer cannot purchase wholesale. For situations like this, ag retailers must develop innovative services to reach growers who are otherwise difficult to reach.



*You may perform field scouting for a grower today, but down the road you might have the chance to supply that grower with seed, fertilizer, and fuel.*





### **Don't Become Complacent with Loyal Customers**

There are only so many growers each year who can be convinced to switch their business to another retailer. Thus, the business model for retailers is to build or ensure a strong margin with existing customers.

New customers are great. They add money to the bottom line, but consistent income from long-term customers is even better for retailers. Retailers also need to be careful that they don't work so hard to attract new customers that they forget about growers who have been loyal for many years.

It is easy to become complacent with a grower's business. "OK, Tom, last year we did this. Is this what you want to do again? OK, let's go ahead and do the same thing."

If a retailer continues operating this way too long, customers may be enticed by someone new simply because they no longer feel their business matters to the retailer. No one likes spending money with someone they feel is taking them for granted.

Retailers must also be creative to treat customers they've been working with for several years with the same level of enthusiasm as their first-time customers. Loyal customers need the same energy as new customers. They should be "touched" on a regular basis. Retailers cannot let any customer perceive apathy. "We were late to your field, because we wanted to be there right away for the new customer." Customers notice that.







*A lot more than business takes place at the retail counter. Interactions at the retail counter may be one of the most important places where growers can feel that their business is truly appreciated.*



*A handshake and a retailer's word are still important to growers.*

### **A Grower Behind the Counter or Over the Phone is a 'New' Customer**

A branch office is the hub of a retail operation. Individual branch employees multitask — schedule, weigh trucks, help customers, and answer phones. They anticipate, plan, and remind others of what needs to be done. Branches do not function without talented employees filling those positions.

Administrative assistants are responsible for billing and helping customers. Some will call growers about meeting opportunities, help them determine how many points they have accrued on their applicator licenses, and help keep their billing straight.

If one branch office employee doesn't do a good job, many of the retailer's commitments won't be fulfilled. Each branch requires good documentation, communication, and detailed and service-oriented staff. It is so important to have front-line positions filled properly, because the customer-employee-company interaction is re-established each time in the office.

Every call and every walk-in is important even if a customer deals with the same person. Each contact reinforces why the customer is (or should be) doing business with the retailer. Although every interaction does not ring up as a sale, every interaction has important ramifications for future sales or opportunities to work with the customer.

### **Do What's Right Even if Others Don't**

Be yourself. Employees may hear their "bosses" say one thing, but then make special arrangements outside of company policies to get sales. Employees may hear a pledge that the company will deal with problems quickly, but see that problems created by the company





are not quickly or fairly resolved. Such situations reinforce the notion to some employees that sales count more than ethics.

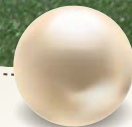
Employees must operate by their own moral compasses. If one employee is not doing the “right” things, that doesn’t mean that everyone should change their ethics to meet the lowered expectations.

### **Do What You Say You Are Going to Do and Do It Well**

Trust is the foundation of any relationship. If retailers do what they say they are going to do, and treat customers the way they want to be treated, success follows in business and in life.

The worst decision a retailer can make is to say the politically correct thing in front of customers when selling, but then to do less than what was promised while performing the work. Growers are very sensitive to double-talk and react strongly. Retailers must live up to their promises, or they will lose their customers’ trust and respect.

Pay attention to the details that make the difference. When a customer brings a wagon to the barn lot to load product, make sure product gets in the wagon or call the customer if there are delays. Every little interaction with the customer must be positive, even to the point that resolving a problem can in itself be turned into a positive.



*Pearl of Wisdom*

*Do what you say and do it well.*

*Retailers must perform even the most mundane tasks well so that they make decisions and provide advice based on the best evidence possible.*





### Under Promise and Over Deliver

Some retailers deliver more than they initially promise. Over performance means that employees are doing more than was agreed to with the customers.

For instance, small courtesies such as closing a farm gate, putting off work in a muddy field for another day, letting growers know about changing the herbicide combination to deal with some different weeds the applicator found, or similar discussions always puts a retailer in better standing with the grower. Another good example of under promising and over delivering is arriving to help a customer much earlier than promised.

One retailer provided this story of going above and beyond the call of duty:

“Sometimes a father and son take equipment to the field. Both wives work off the farm so there are times when the father and son are in the field and have no way to get home. There are other times they call and say, ‘I need two bags of insecticide. Actually, I don’t really need the insecticide as much as I really need a sandwich and drink. Is there any way that you can bring me two bags of insecticide and stop by the store and pick up two sandwiches?’ Our rig driver throws the two bags of insecticide in the truck, stops at the store, and takes them two sandwiches and Cokes.”

The potential problems with delivering more than what’s promised is that it sets a precedent that retailers are going to provide the same level of service every year. Ag retail firms should be careful when delivering more than they promise. If, for example, a retailer works hard to bring ammonia wagons everywhere a grower needs them one year, the retailer will be expected to repeat that experience each year.



*You never know what individual in a crowd might become your next customer. After you can put a face with the farm operation, you can understand the grower and offer better advice.*

### They Are Not a Customer Today, But Tomorrow Is Another Day

Respect growers who are loyal to other retailers. A customer’s loyalty is something to be valued in today’s business world. But even if a grower is loyal to a competitor, a retailer needs to touch that person in any way possible. The retailer can’t deliver fuel to the grower today, but the retailer can be active in the community. Retailers hope that growers hear positive, word-of-mouth testimonials, so if the growers are ready to change suppliers, they will think of these testimonials when they select their next retailer.

Ask prospective customers for a chance to earn their business. But be careful approaching growers who are customers of competitors. Successful retailers should never criticize the competition; instead they should be positive in their remarks.

Consider an approach like this: “I know Jack’s been doing a good job for years. I think we have something here they can’t offer. Let us do this for you and see what you think.”

When a retailer criticizes a competitor, the grower hears, “I really don’t think Jack has been giving you the best service.” Such a statement implies that the grower is foolish for doing business with the other retailer. And there is nothing that infuriates customers more than to be told they are foolish or make poor decisions.



Criticizing competitors is not a good way to establish a business relationship with any prospective customer.

If growers switch retailers, there is a good chance they are unhappy for some reason. When this happens, a retailer has a golden opportunity to deliver what the competition did not.

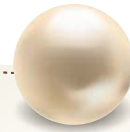
Several retailers have experienced less than desirable results when they lured customers with lower prices. If a grower is willing to jump once for price, then the customer is willing to jump the next year when someone else offers a lower price. Growers who are willing to jump from retailer to retailer for price are probably not long-term customers with whom a retailer can develop a long-term relationship. However, a lucky retailer might prove the value to that grower beyond just the price for a product or service.

### **Don't Give Up on Lost Customers**

Losing customers is never a good thing, especially if it was due to poor service or worse yet, due to recommendations that did not work as well as expected. Many retailers have lost customers due to past bad experiences.

Sometimes, we think former customers can never be convinced to return. In one example, a manager told a new employee not to talk to a grower whose business was previously lost. The employee, being a good (or naïve) salesperson, went to see the grower anyway. The salesperson was shocked to hear the grower say, "I've been wondering why you guys quit knocking on my door."

Growers have long memories, but those memories can be changed. Retailers have to do the best they can to regain lost growers.



*Pearl of Wisdom*

*Don't give up on a lost customer.*

There are reasons why growers used to do business with their former retailers for all those years before the "problems" happened. All retailers can say is that they are sorry about what happened in the past, discuss what they currently have, and explain how they can work for their customers today.

Retailers must simply ask lost customers to give them another chance to earn their business. All the customers can say is no. But then again, they just might say yes.

But probably most important, a retailer has to know as soon as possible if a good customer is not coming back. Retailers have a greater chance of getting customers back if they talk to them soon after they have decided to leave.

Retailers should ask themselves who their top 50 customers are. It is important to know these top customers well. Retailers should monitor their histories and to talk to them as soon as they notice any changes in relationships or purchasing behaviors.



*Accept the fact that not everything works as well as planned.  
When retailers fail to deliver on their promises,  
they must work to correct their mistakes.*







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## *Conclusion:* **GOOD CUSTOMER SERVICE OR IT'S JUST A JOB**

**G**ood customer service is really the foundation of being in business. Customers can get products and services from multiple sources. The only thing they cannot get from multiple sources is you! What value do you add to the transaction? If you do not add value then you become a vending machine. And if you are happy with that you will eventually be replaced by a vending machine with more bells and whistles.

Good customer service actually is not enough anymore. The bar has been raised so high that in order to succeed, you cannot just be good, you must be exceptional. You can deliver great customer service by doing small things really well.

Commercial ag retail businesses — whether co-ops, independents, or company chains — are challenged to keep abreast of costly advances in machinery, upgrades in computer technology, improvements in seed technology, changes in agricultural practices, and expectations by processors and consumers. They must constantly reinvent their commercial operations to stay ahead of those growers who want the latest techniques, products, and services on their farms. Today's ag retailers

must take the lead in adopting new ideas if they are to remain relevant to the leading edge of growers.

Selling products or delivering services must come with reasonable profits that will cover new equipment, allow for growth, and create reasonable earnings. However, success is not selling a product or service to individual growers for the first time.

Success is selling them the products and services multiple times as part of long-term relationships. This model for success requires a retailer's entire staff to work together to meet the common goal of helping their growers make better decisions. Better decisions involve solutions based on science. In the long run, retailers measure success by doing what's right for their customers, their companies, and themselves. The more retailers are indispensable to their customers, the greater the profit margins they can make on their products and services.

Growers want the best for their businesses just like retailers want the best for theirs. This is why a retailer's employees must make sure that each grower understands how much she or he is valued and appreciated. When employees do a good job for customers, they should be recognized for their efforts. Retailers achieve success when growers treat them as part of their operations, rather





*Pearl of Wisdom*

*You* are the only thing a customer  
cannot get elsewhere.





*Pearl of Wisdom*

*You have achieved success when you are treated as part of a grower's operations.*

than someone they just send checks to for work performed.

In truth, we'll never truly know how a grower's interactions with an ag retailer's employees influences decisions to deal with one retailer over another. Every grower contacted directly from behind the sales counter, on the farm, in town, or in church can be a potential customer based on each interaction. What growers see or



*Growers put a lot of confidence in a retailer's recommendations, but they also expect that the advice will result in more profitable operations.*







hear every day help them form opinions about an ag retailer and its employees. This is why every employee should consider him or herself a part of sales, because the collective actions of the retailer's staff can recommit and resell the grower to the company.

Growers easily recognize good service and personal commitments to do the best job possible. How each employee presents himself or herself, and how each one communicates, influences what a grower thinks about the company. If each employee is on his or her results-oriented game, customers will understand that they matter.



*A retailer's sign — the brand — draws attention to a field. Make sure you can proudly point out that work to others.*



*The farm family is the customer.*







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