

READERS MADE THEIR PICKS FOR THE BEST BUSINESSES IN MORE THAN 80 CATEGORIES

Customer service decides champs

Lethbridge Sun Times

"I was in town visiting family and my van broke down and after-hours they brought my van in and fixed it. I was very impressed with their service and dedication." That's what Mike Schneider of Beaverlodge, Alberta had to say about his recent experience at Texaco Xpress Lube & Wash on 219 Stafford Drive North.

Recognizing these sorts of efforts of businesses that offer customer service that's above and beyond the norm is the driving force behind the Lethbridge Sun Times' Best of the Best survey. And Lethbridge business owners should be giving themselves pat on the back for a job well done. How do we know? Readers said so loud and clear on the hundreds of surveys submitted.

Satisfied customers are often happy to spread the word about businesses that give them good service and the Best of the Best survey conducted each January offers an avenue to do just that.

A common thread in voters' comments is that specialized items, personalized service, and knowledgeable staff are important to shoppers, whether they waste a little about what makes some of their choices the best, such as Angie

Iamenco who penned "service and decent prices," or a lot, such as Lindsey de Kreek of Coalhurst, who nominated businesses in all 86 categories and wrote, "These are the places that I feel like customer service is Number One and when you get a great reception, you always want to go back."

The list of winners features its own theme: The majority of them are independent, local businesses.

That comes as no surprise as the voters' comments reflected their desire to shop in places that offer the human qualities of character, charm, serendipity and community.

But it's not enough in this economic climate to slap up a sign that says "Open for business" and expect people to shop there because you provide a local product or service. Local businesses have to give consumers reasons to shop local, especially in this financial time when shoppers are putting more thought behind where they spend their hard-earned dollars.

That's where customer service becomes key.

"It's been a really interesting time," says Lynda Kavanagh, owner of WOW Communications & Training Corp. She and her business consultants have been helping small businesses with sales and

marketing issues in Lethbridge and Calgary since 1994.

During the economic boom in 2007 and 2008, business people's idea of customer service was "picking up the phone," she said, especially if they were businesses in the in-demand sectors such as construction and plumbing. "If you were a customer who called, you wouldn't even get a phone call back because (the businesses) were too busy."

Then the economic bubble burst, and businesses struggled to survive and took a good, hard look at their operating strategies.

"I think what it did is it jolted people and they realized they could no longer run like they were before the boom."

It's far more expensive to gain a new customer than it is to keep an old one, business gurus say. That's why customer loyalty is vital — and employees who are indifferent are so dangerous, she says.

"You hear from people who say they went to a store and the employees didn't care if you ever went back. Business owners never really know how much money an employee who is indifferent costs them or how much damage they do until they're gone. And then you start to hear from your customers."

Repeat business can help a business

thrive while a lack of it is often a determining factor in its death.

"When you rely on repeat business, customer service is so much more important," Kavanagh says.

Customer service isn't a term reserved solely for salespeople, she adds.

"Some people think it's their job to provide customer service but everyone does, even the person who answers your phone. That person sets the tone."

However, she admits sometimes when it comes to customer service there can be too much of a good thing. She advises employees not to "pounce" on customers but take an approach that's similar to, "Hey, I'm here and when you need me I'm here."

"And when they need you, hopefully you're there," she says.

Reader participation in the Best of the Best survey was once again high, with the majority of voters choosing to make their picks online. An online voting component was introduced three years ago to help provide a truer depiction of readers' choices by eliminating the possibility of voting irregularities.

The list of winners in the Lethbridge Sun Times' annual Best of the Best Lethbridge readers' survey appears on pages 8-10.