

A person wearing light-colored, possibly khaki, pants and black sandals with gold and pearl accents is walking on a tiled floor. They are carrying several shopping bags: a red one, a brown one, a white one with 'SALE' written on it, and a pink one. The background is slightly blurred, suggesting a shopping mall or store environment.

Lessons from the Sales Rack

by Allison Hester

SALE

Have you ever made a mistake?

Of course you have, and fortunately, so have your customers. That's good news because it means your customers can empathize with you when you mess up – not that they always will. But how you respond to your mistakes can play a big role in how your customers respond to you.

Perhaps no one knows this more right now than JCPenney. The 100-year-old department store implemented a number of changes last year, and they weren't well received – causing a \$4 billion loss for the company. Ouch! While analysts are still delving into the exact reasons for the loss, the primary problem was that in their attempt to reach a younger, hipper audience, they neglected their core clientele, and the customers quit buying.

In early May, Penney's launched an online ad campaign where they did the unthinkable – they apologized! Whether it will be enough to save the company is yet to be seen, but early indications are positive.

So how can this apply to you (and me)? I believe there are several lessons here.

Customers don't really care WHY you mess up; they just want you to make it right.

And making it right begins with admitting when you were wrong.

This often goes against human nature, where we naturally want to make excuses, point fingers and place blame. "My technician called in sick." "My equipment gave out on me." "We ran out of time." And so on. That's not to say these things don't happen, but it still doesn't right the wrong of not fulfilling your end of the bargain. So start with an apology, then figure out how to fix the situation as best as possible.

The following are two true stories.

First, on our "Cleaning in the News Page," we recently mentioned a newspaper "consumer watchdog" columnist who took on a complaint about a local roof cleaning contractor. The customer was very happy with the way his roof came out, but claimed that the roof cleaning chemicals used killed \$600 in plants. The roof cleaner, in turn, said he had verbally explained to the homeowner when to water the plants and what to do if it rained versus didn't rain. (The instructions apparently were somewhat complicated.) Verbal instructions or not, the plants died. The unhappy customer took the matter to the newspaper, and the watchdog columnist sided with the homeowner. Now the roof cleaner's reputation has been soiled publically in his local community and across the Internet... over \$600.

Now for the second example. In his book *The Pressure Cleaning Marketing Bible*, Steve Stephens talks about an EXPENSIVE mistake that still pains him to think about today.

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His technicians were washing an expensive-neighborhood's houses for an upcoming parade of homes. One of the houses had sandy-faced brick. While Stephens had trained his technicians on how to clean this delicate surface, one of his technicians apparently spaced off and before he realized what he had done, he had removed the sand from the lovely pink-colored brick, changing the house's color to red! What did Stephens do? He spent over \$25,000 out of his pocket (it was not covered by insurance) to have the messed up bricks corrected. Ouch!

Expensive mistake? Absolutely. BUT, as word traveled about the way Stephens handled the situation, he ended up gaining several new homeowner's associations and new construction companies as clients.

Customers want you to listen to what they say!



This is perhaps the most powerful line from the JCP commercial: "We learned a very simple thing: to listen to you, to hear what you need, to make your life beautiful."

As contract cleaners, your job is to make your customers' lives beautiful! Whether that's by giving them a gorgeously cleaned and sealed deck, or by attracting customers to their businesses because the sidewalks are washed, you are making their lives better. But are you listening to what the customers have to say? Perhaps an even better question is whether you are even asking?

I know of at least one window cleaning that bases their technicians' promotions and raises, in part, not only on what kind of survey responses they get back, but how many they get back. It's that important. So, are you asking – *really* asking – your customers for feedback? If not, why not? Is it because you just haven't taken the time to implement this essential practice, or are you perhaps afraid of what you'll find out?

Customers want to feel valued.

The JCPenney commercial concluded with these words: "Come back to J.C. Penney. We heard you. Now we'd love to see you." It is clear throughout the video that Penney's realized they cannot exist without their customers. Do your customers feel this way? Do you follow up after your services to see if they have any questions or problems? Do you send thank you cards? Do you extend special offers to your best customers?

All of these things increase intimacy and connection with your customers. In turn, they also make your customers more apt to forgive you if and when problems do arise.