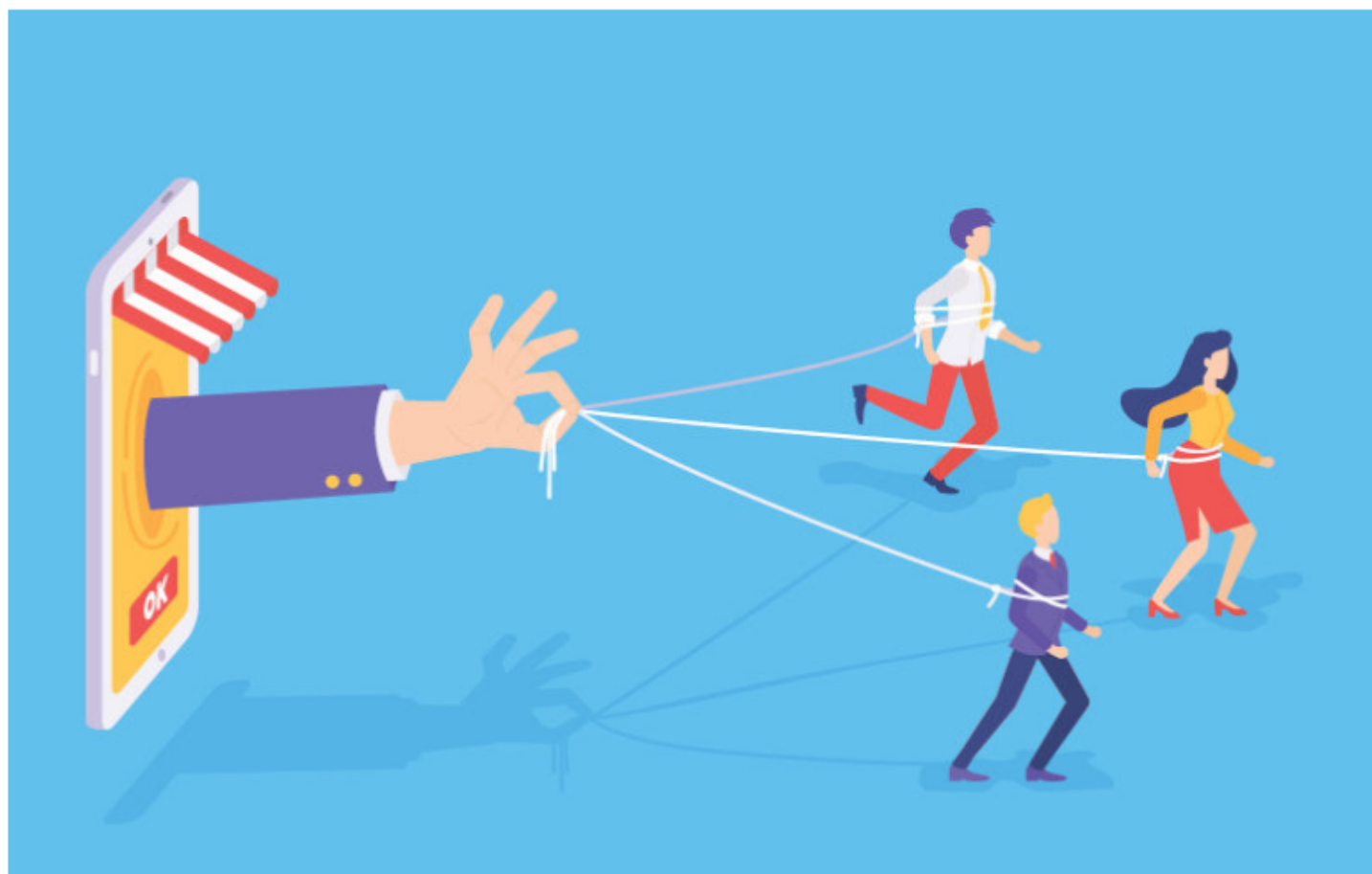# How to Win Back Lost Customers

*June 3, 2021*   *Megan Gosch*   *No Comments*



**It's been months since Mrs. Cline's been back** to Kovac Automotive for her regular service and owner Joe Kovac has taken note.

Has she been busy? She did mention she had a few trips planned. Maybe she's driving less and spacing out her service? Maybe she's moved? Or worse yet, maybe she's had a negative experience and decided to take her car somewhere else.

The possibilities are endless, but Kovac knows one thing for sure. If there's anything he can do to remedy a bad experience he's not giving up without a fight.

"Not everyone is looking to be a regular, but the loss of a longtime customer can be a punch to the gut," he says. "With that one customer you could be losing future business from their neighbors, their friends, or their kids down the line along with that regular business. That's business you don't just want to let walk away."

Kovac says he's fortunate to have a solid staff and loyal customers, so he's not often in the position of wooing back wary customers, but when he does he's found a few helpful tactics are key.

Here, he and customer service expert Laurie Guest share their tips for winning back lost customers.

## Mine your shop data.

Chances are, you're already keeping tabs on your customers in some form or other, but a thorough analysis of

those key stats can help you build a baseline understanding of your customer's behavior.

"If I'm a regular customer that usually comes in every four to six months, but I haven't been back in a year, how will you know? What are you doing to track that?" says Guest. "How will you know who needs to be won back if you're not really tracking those you've lost?"

Kovac currently uses MechanicNet, a web-based customer retention software, to track the habits of his repeat customers, and there are plenty of similar services available on the market, but Guest also notes that data analysis could also be an ideal research project for a shop intern. "Tracking those 'voting with your feet' trends is time consuming and more college students are looking for internship opportunities now than ever."

## Perfect a prompt response.

"The speed at which your absence as a customer is missed is critical," says Guest. "If a shop is taking a year to check in with me, they're not winning me back. But a six-month check-in might have been another story."

Kovac checks his customer retention data twice a year, sits down with his general manager to analyze the results and talk through any shared intel on why a customer might not have been back recently, then he gets to work sending personal emails and placing calls.

"For us, a review twice a year is great timing because we're able to flag anyone who typically comes pretty frequently but hasn't been in a few months, but the most time that's passed is six months," he says.

## Make yourself accessible.

As a hands-on shop owner, Kovac says most of his customers know him or have interacted with him personally. He also adds his cell number to every invoice and makes it a point to let customers know he's always available if they need anything or have a concern.

"If something went wrong, I'm much more likely to hear from them if they know they won't have to go through six layers of management to get things handled and they're going to feel more comfortable reaching out if they've met or talked with me before," he says.

Kovac finds a call or an email from a customer with a complaint to be a gift. "They're giving me a chance to fix the issue in real time. I didn't have to track them down or put them on the spot and they feel heard."

## Go in with a plan.

Both Guest and Kovac find calling to be most effective when it comes to making headway with customers, but Guest notes a general plan and a few rehearsed answers can go a long way in keeping the conversation on track—especially if you're on a fact-finding mission to understand what might have gone wrong.

"Charting a few different courses as a plan of attack will keep you from scrambling," she says. "Maybe they'll say they haven't been in because they bought a new car and they've been taking it to the dealership. That response will fall into a certain category of your plan and you can move forward accordingly."

Guest notes written answers aren't a bad idea, but should be used as a script. "You don't want to sound robotic, but jotting down a few ready-made phrases you tend to use day to day will help you sound more natural and give you a resource to fall back on if you go blank."

# Take an empathetic approach.

A call to a customer gone MIA might be a fact-finding mission for shop owners, but Kovac and Guest recommend framing the conversation from a place of concern for the customer. Those who feel put on the spot aren't likely to be honest or come back in the long run.

"You have to ask 'what is my  motivation for the call and how is that going to make the customer feel?' If someone calls me asking 'What's it going to take to get you back in?' that's a very uncomfortable situation and I'm going to feel pressured and try to get off the line as quick as I can," says Guest. "If it feels like you're really trying to help me or change things in your shop for the better I get to feel like I'm helping out by opening up."

When reaching out to customers, Kovac first checks to see how the customer and their vehicle are doing. "I'll say 'We haven't seen you in a while and just wanted to check and see how everything's going? How's that new battery holding up?"

If a customer begins to open up about a problem "I immediately express empathy," says Kovac. "I always start with an apology for what they've experienced, let them know that if they're not happy I'm not happy, and then explain what we can do to get them fixed up," he says.

## Keep it Genuine

Guest notes that an empathetic approach only goes so far if the message sounds forced or feels hollow.

While Kovac makes a point of making customer check-in calls himself, "those calls make the biggest impact when made by the person on your team with the most dynamic personality," says Guest. "Those calls mean a lot coming from the owner, but the person on your team who can bring the most energy, compassion, and curiosity to that conversation is going to be your best bet."

## Ask open-ended questions.

Through years of experience, Kovac has learned it can take some coaxing to get customers talking openly about the real reason they haven't returned.

He and Guest advise asking open-ended questions. "If something went wrong, they're going to have something to say about it, and avoiding those yes or no questions gives them more room to say what's on their mind," she says.

Kovac also stresses leaving space in the conversation for customers to vent. "If you're lucky enough to get them talking the best thing you can do is close your mouth and just listen. You can absorb everything that really happened if you sit back, listen and let them unload a bit. Then you can say 'this is how I'm going to fix this.'"

## Create a VIP experience.

When customers do return after a negative encounter, a seamless, personalized experience is a must.

"If you're lucky enough to get them back a second time and something else goes wrong, they're not coming back for a third visit," says Guest. "Everyone on the team should be informed of the situation so they're ready to greet and guide that person through their next visit."

Kovac sets customers up with a specific appointment time during his check-in calls and immediately writes up a ticket while the details of the situation are fresh in his mind. When the customer returns, Kovac greets them personally, then explains the next steps to the customer and his team.

"They might feel a little apprehensive or frustrated or embarrassed coming back in and we want them to feel special and that we understand their needs right when they walk in," he says. "They shouldn't have to explain the situation to me or a service writer all over again. They can walk in and know that we remember who they are, what they need, and that we're ready with a fix."