
8 Simple Things Local Businesses Can Do To Improve

“How You Can Use The Feedback of 1200
Shoppers To Add Rocket-Fuel To Your
Revenue and Bullet-Proof Your Business”

By Jon Pole

Introduction:

Throughout the following pages I will share the **8 Things That Local Businesses Can Do to Improve.** These are the responses from a survey of local consumers and while I'm not a statistician, I can tell you that all of these items are relevant to your business. If you take action and focus on these 8 areas you can bulletproof your business from the competition. Throughout my career of helping independent business owners I have learned one thing: Business Owners Are Busy. From the moment you wake up until you go to bed, your business races through your mind. While this helps fuel your success, there are times that it can "cloud" the attention to the simple things your customers expect from you and your business. As I share the points, I will try and offer some thinking points that you can use to immediately help turbo-charge your business.

One important reminder: These are the words of actual "local" consumers. They were not offered a list of choices. They were asked, "What can local businesses do to improve?" We then left a blank space for them to use their words. This list is a tabulation of those answers. We had more than 1200 respondents. A little more than 62% were women, and the average age was 42. That pretty much describes the most powerful and active consumers available for local businesses. You should listen to them; they may control your future.

8 – Improved Parking

The answer of **Improved Parking** should not shock anyone. After all, it is the foundation of making it easy for your customers to do business with you. While for some businesses “parking” may be an easy issue to solve based on their location, other business owners are forced to deal with Downtown by-laws and regulations. Regardless of your situation – you need to answer the question, “What Can I do to improve my parking situation?”

Thinking Points:

- Is your parking lot clearly marked with Signage?
- Is there a way to visually educate your customers about parking?
- Is there a way your staff can verbally communicate parking?
- Can you “go” to your customer and eliminate parking?
- Do you use the “best spot” or is it available for clients?

A Story:

When I first visited New Port Richey in Florida, I loved the fact that some of their local restaurants had “take-out” parking spots. At that time, I had never seen this before, so it was a nice surprise as I pulled up. It was even more impressive when the wait staff came to my car with my order, and the visa machine. I never got out of the car. It was fast for me, and for the restaurant. It also keeps their parking lot in order, and their other customers happy.

7 – Physical Improvement

We have all been in a business, office, restaurant and thought, “Man, this place could use an update.” Well, it’s time to turn that question around on your workplace. Before you bust the bank with renovations, start by asking yourself this question, “What could we do that would improve our customer’s experience when they visit us?” There are times the answer is as simple as a good “spring cleaning”, or a fresh coat of paint in the lobby, other times it may be something more involved. The fact of the matter is, you need to make your business “inviting” and “comfortable” for your customers otherwise; they will take their business elsewhere.

Thinking Points:

- Is your business inviting from the outside?
- What is the first impression when you come in the door?
- Are there “outdated” posters, signs, flyers, promo pieces, magazines?
- Lighting is important – how “bright” are you?
- Have a “fresh” pair of eyes look at your business and give feedback.

A Story:

Think like Sam Walton. There are many stories about how Sam used to visit his competitors and “steal” their great layout ideas. Do the same. Keep in mind you can “steal” great ideas from any business, not just your competitors.

6 – Pricing

First, you should note that Pricing is number 6. **It's not number 1.** The number of business owners who believe that customers only buy things based on price always amazes me. This is simply not true. That being said, if everything is equal between two competitors, then yes, price does matter. Your customers have a better understanding of business than we often give them credit for. In the survey many respondents wrote “lower prices” and then followed it with a smiley face or LOL (laugh out loud). They understand that businesses just can't lower prices. The key words that were repeated over and over in the survey were “**competitive prices**”. Keep those words in mind – “competitive prices”.

Thinking Points:

- Have you compared your prices to the competitors lately?
- Do you have items you aggressively price? If so, highlight them.
- If you have items you can't discount – can you add more value?
- Some Prices are worth advertising.

A Story:

Remember that consumers make choices based on **Time VS Money**. Some people will spend more money to save time, and others will spend time to save money. Are you catering to both types of shoppers or customers?

5 – Have / Participate in Events

Since the beginning of the economic downturn, consumers have become more selective than ever before with how and where they spend their money. It's clear that consumers expect you to get in front of them, and make it easy for them to know who you are and how to do business with you and **why** they should do business with you. They expect businesses to be involved. This means participating in events, hosting specialty events, tying in with other businesses and at times showing up “where and when” they expect to see you.

Thinking Points:

- What event could you host in the next 60 days?
- Are there local events you can co-sponsor?
- What local businesses would compliment your business?
- Make a list – where do your customers expect to see/hear you?
- Could you participate in a fundraiser?

A Story:

Are you participating in the local home/trade show? Think about it.

Thousands of local consumers show up – are they expecting to see and talk to you? Don't just show up “willy-nilly” – have a plan on how you want to impress the Home/Trade Show visitors.

4 – Selection / Products

After reading through the thousands of comments, I believe that Selection/Products is directed more at some of the bigger box stores rather than smaller independent businesses. That being said, the consumers have spoken, so we should listen. Clearly what is frustrating to consumers is when they show up to make a purchase and the product is unavailable or worse, the product is available, but does not meet their need in the terms of size, shape or color. Bottom-line; if you're going to be famous for something, you need to be able to deliver - every time.

Thinking Points:

- Could you add more selection or more inventory?
- What is your “Plan B” if you run out of products?
- Does your staff understand “Plan B”?
- Have you educated your customers about your selection?

A Story:

After Black Friday 2009, I heard a caller to a Business Television Program tell a story about how she went to 3-4 stores to buy a specific product and they were all out of the product. When she got home she went online and bought the item and 6-7 other items. If you don't have the product, your customers will find it.

3 – Advertise / Promote

Advertising is more than running one ad - it takes time. Your advertising schedule should be as long as you plan to be in business. Why? People forget. People Move. Traffic Patterns change. Products Change. Your job is to make sure consumers **KNOW** you! They want to know you! The consumers who completed the survey expressed a high desire to do business with local businesses – their complaint – they don't know where to go or they're never invited to do business with you. Think about all the business YOU DON'T do business with? Why is that? Is it because you have never been invited into their business? You need to advertise and promote. It's not enough to just open the doors and "hope" people come in. You can do better. Consumers want to know WHAT you have to offer **AND** how YOU can make their LIFE better.

Thinking Points:

- Do you have an advertising strategy in place?
- Are you promoting what you are famous for?
- How are you making it easy for people to "remember" you?
- Figure your ad budget here: www.adbudgetcalculator.com
- Do you have co-op or vendor dollars available?

A Story:

I used to drive an hour round trip to get my hot tub supplies until a local store promoted they sell the same products. For two years I made that drive, the local store where I now shop is geographically **the closest** store to my house. Until they ran their radio ad, I had never been educated about what they offered.

2 – Hours of Operation

For most small businesses, especially an owner-operated business “hours of operation” can be one of the most highly debated topics. In many cases it comes down to “who will work the hours” and “what is the cost-benefit”. Debates aside, the consumers have spoken, and they want you to be open when THEY want to shop, not when YOU want to work. Is there a standard? Not anymore, there are so many businesses with different sizes and shapes that we don’t live in a “one size fits all” society. You need to look at your business, your industry, and your competitors and ASK YOUR customers what they want from your business to determine what hours are best suited for you (and more importantly your customers). Think of the shopper who is coming to do business with you, they park; they walk up to the door, pull the door and it’s locked. Man, at that moment YOU LOST, and it’s hard to win that customer back.

Thinking Points:

- Are your hours clearly posted on your door?
- Do you include your hours in your advertising/web?
- Have you asked your clients what hours THEY prefer?
- What is the cost of “lost opportunity” of not being open?
- Can you open 10am-7pm to catch the “9-2-5” crowd?

A Story:

“...Or by personal appointment” This is one of my favorite signs. I saw it hanging under the hours sign at a small furniture store. The sign says it all – it says – “we here to serve you – when you need us”. A simple fix.

1 – Customer Service

Comment after comment in the survey talked about “customer service”. They covered everything from smiles, to attitudes, to product knowledge. Customer Service used to be easy. It used to be common sense. Today, that is not the case. Great Customer Service is hard work. You cannot just leave customer service to your staff. Too often they will fail. You need to be proactive and build defined systems of “how YOU want YOUR customers” treated in every situation. You should have written, clear, easy to follow procedures. Start with “how to” answer the phone and end with “how to” say good-bye when a customer leaves – and fill in everything in between. Don’t leave your customer-service to chance – it’s too valuable. Don’t be afraid to plan to “exceed expectations”

Thinking Points:

- Copy great customer service techniques you see at other businesses?
- Write it down. Create scripts for your staff.
- Make sure you have, read and respond to comment cards / emails?
- Ask your customers opinion.
- Send in a secret shopper – get a real evaluation of what is happening.
- Be honest – how about you? Are you good at customer service?
- What things can you automate to improve your service?

A Story

Your competition is EVERYONE. If your customers get great service at another business in a totally different category, they expect the same from you when they walk through your door.

Quick Comparison

Now, to drive the importance of these 8 points home, let's do a quick comparison against the giant – Wal-Mart.

Parking:

We can all agree that Wal-Mart rarely has any parking issues.

Physical Improvement:

I've been in some dumpy K-Mart stores, but I have never been in a run down Wal-Mart. For the most part they're clean and tidy stores.

Pricing:

Wal-Mart is a low price leader in some categories. In the categories they do not lead in price – they are “competitive”. They also do a great job of highlighting their “roll-back” prices to create an even greater perception of value.

Have / Participate in Events:

Wal-Mart will frequently host non-profit groups to fundraise at their locations. I have seen Wal-Mart involved in local community projects, donate money and run a booth a Home Show..

Selection / Products:

One of the crown jewels of Wal-Mart is how they perfected their distribution system to maintain well-stocked stores.

Advertise / Promote:

Wal-Mart does Radio, Newspaper, Television, Internet and they maximize their vendor relationships.

Hours of Operation:

It would be fair to say – “they set the standard”.

Customer Service:

While I can't say that Wal-Mart's Customer Service is perfect, here's what I do know:

- Someone greets me when I come in the store.
- All staff are clearly marked with Blue Aprons (if I need help)
- At check out, I'm asked, “Did I find everything I was looking for?”

They do a pretty good job. Not perfect, but good. What ideas can you “swipe” from Wal-Mart and implement in your business? Think Big. Remember – Wal-Mart started in a town of 10,000 people and grew to become the world's largest retailer. You could be next. All you need to do is just do what your customers are asking you to do. In fact, do it better than they expect and your business has nowhere to go but straight up!

Action Plan

Your customers have spoken. You need to make sure that working on these 8 points are part of your daily routine. You need to share them with your staff so they are in a position to better serve your customers. Take a few moments and fill-out this ACTION PLAN so you can create a direction, and get started!

Write down ONE Action item for each point:

Improved Parking	
Physical Improvement	
Pricing	
Have/Participate – Events	
Selection / Products	
Advertise / Promote	
Hours of Operation	
Customer Service	