

How Often Do YOU Get Repeat Business?

By *Larry Robbin*

What percentage of businesses that use *your* services become repeat customers?

Repeat business is an indicator of customer satisfaction in the private sector, but it is rarely tracked in public-sector disability programs. It's true that some businesses are too small to offer much repeat business. However, if a company has 50 or more employees and has periodic job openings – they *should* be coming to your supported employment agency for repeat business.

If your initial referral is still working, your hiring contact is still there, and the business isn't in a hiring freeze you should assume that something went wrong with the initial use of your services if you aren't getting repeat business. Ask your contact why they aren't hiring from you again, but realize that you may not get the truth.

Imagine yourself in a restaurant eating a meal that isn't very good. It's not so bad if you want your money back; the bigger issue is, *are you planning on coming back to the restaurant?* When a waitperson asks about the food, research by the National Restaurant Association shows that only 4% of customers that don't like the meal will say they don't like it! Most people say everything is ok even if they have no intention of returning. Dissatisfied customers don't want to cause trouble, and they don't believe it will help to say anything. Your business contact may not admit it, but there is a problem if you aren't getting repeat business.

The following are some of the most common repeat business problems you need to consider:

❖ **The hiring manager liked the person they hired, but they did not like working with the job developer so there is no repeat business.** In business this is called liking the product but not liking the salesperson. See what happens if someone else with your agency or organization contacts the business and takes over from the previous staff member. It may take a while to get a job lead, but if personality,

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style or business conduct was the problem with the initial staffer with your agency, and a *different* individual is brought in, a new job lead should occur eventually.

❖ **The person they hired from your agency was ok, but he/she was not good enough to make them want more people that you recommend.** This problem can be determined if you perform quarterly evaluations after the initial hiring stage. However, if you evaluate placements less often, it will take longer for this issue to be revealed. Three very brief (no longer than 15 minutes) conversations with a businessperson within a year will tell you a lot. In addition, be on the lookout for subtle signs to see if

they liked your referral such as pay raises, additional hours or promotions. If your referral wasn't any better than the individuals they hired on their own, there is little reason for them to come back to you.

❖ **The person they hired from you isn't ok, but they are keeping the employee out of pity about his or her disability.** This can be hard to detect, but watch for pity language clues or over accommodation on the part of the boss or co-workers. In over accommodation the employer or co-workers intervene when a difficult task comes up so your referral never learns how to do the task. This is time consuming, and while the business may retain your initial referral they can't afford to have more people in this situation so your agency doesn't get repeat business.

❖ **Something was wrong with the process.** Common business complaints we receive at Robbin and Associates from our private-sector clients about the way disability employment programs operate, are that we take too long, we interfere with business, and we don't get back to them fast enough. Speed is highly valued in the private sector, but it's rarely an emphasis in government agencies or other nonprofits. Whether it's face-to-face or on the Internet, businesses spend a lot of money trying to get goods and services to customers faster. Organize a speed-of-delivery taskforce, *and make it a goal to shorten the time in every step of your process.* Sometimes you'll find it's your partners that are too slow, and so we have to work together to get faster. However, if we emphasize speed and quality, we've found we get more repeat business.

Don't ask for a meeting with a businessperson when a 10-minute phone call or an email will do. Do we appreciate how true it is in the private sector that "time is money"? Be careful your services don't get in the way of the business. Don't be a burden on supervisors or co-workers.

Create a fast, seamless, and non-intrusive way of working with employers. Make it a rule to follow business etiquette and return every call and email in 24 hours or less. If you overcome these problems you will get more repeat business.

❖ **You didn't have a plan for repeat business so the employer forgot about you.** In a repeat business plan the employer sees the name of your organization twice a month after using your services. This does *not* mean asking them about hiring each time; rather, most contacts should be about increasing their profits. Develop a computer-based and hard copy file of articles about how to improve profits. Send these periodically to your business customers. For instance, clip articles from the *Wall Street Journal, Inc., Fast Company,* and other business publications. Also, check out one of the Small Business Administration (www.sba.gov) email lists, and send their information to your customers. Send businesses announcements about Chamber of Commerce mixers and other events where they can get new customers.

If you help them get a new customer they will never forget you. If four of your follow-up contacts provide profitable information the fifth contact about your *hiring* services will get their attention. Develop a long-term repeat business follow-up marketing plan so businesses see you as a profit-making partner that look forward to getting your information. Doing so will keep you in line for future job openings.

Summary

Shift your agency's work from the smaller perspective of seeing a one-time hire as the key to success – to a bigger picture, business perspective that makes repeat business the ultimate goal. You'll satisfy more businesses and open the doors to more and better jobs for people with disabilities. ■

For more than 45 years, Larry Robbin, Executive Director of Robbin and Associates, has been closing the gap between disability employment programs and the private sector through his innovative on-site, telephone and computer consulting and training services. For more information, email larryrobbin@aol.com or phone (510) 834-8524.