

# Growing his business, one customer at a time...



Photo courtesy of Tom Leonard's Farmer's Market

Leonard loves to walk the aisles of his store and talk to customers. He's intent on wanting to know what they think so he can do it better. That's the idea behind the suggestion box, which is prominently positioned where customers can see it on their way out of the store. A jaunty picture of Leonard adorns the top of the suggestion forms available near the box.

Many of the messages he gets are full of praise for the store.

"Wonderful store. Great prices."  
 "I love your store."  
 "Fresh mozzarella in Richmond! We'll be back."  
 "We use herbs a lot but can never use a whole bunch. It would be great if bunches of mixed herbs were sold."

Those messages make him happy, Leonard says. But so do the ones that suggest improvements – or even complain. Leonard says the customer who complains "is our best friend, because they're giving us a chance to improve."

Take, for instance, the e-mail Leonard got in mid-May from Rosemary and Gus Pastore of Richmond:

On the store's Web site (<http://www.tomleonards.com/>), near the top of the home page, is a button visitors can click to send an e-mail straight to Leonard's own computer – "right to my desk, not to a secretary's."

"Checking the suggestion box and checking customer e-mails is the most important part of my day. I do it first thing in the morning and throughout the day."

Over by the cheese counter, Pat Chandler of Short Pump and Patti Rowe of Charlottesville have just met for the first time and are engaged in an animated discussion of how to use fresh mozzarella. Tom Leonard joins them and offers them each a sample. Chandler takes a bite and sighs happily. "Good mozzarella cheese is heavenly," she says. "This is delicious," Rowe adds.



Then the two shoppers and Leonard are deep into a conversation about recipes.

"I take a flatbread and add romaine lettuce, mozzarella, roasted red peppers, and maybe some deli meat, and make a wrap," Chandler tells the other two. "And if you are watching your carbs, you can leave out the bread and make a wrap using the romaine."

"Hi. I would first like to thank you for your fine store in Glen Allen. The produce and fresh cheese is great. The service is excellent and I do enjoy shopping for fresh fruit and produce, but I have to tell you I cannot shop in your store again because of all of the music you think I need to hear while shopping. Why do stores now think that we need to be entertained while shopping? For me I am trying to concentrate on what items I may need for the next few days or what I need for dinner that night."

An hour later, Leonard sent an e-mail reply. "After I read your note, Mrs. Pastore, I walked over to the stereo ... and turned it down 30 percent. I went one step further and changed the volume setting to a lower level on our opening checklists for all the managers," he wrote. "I sure hope you come back again and give my store another try."

A few hours later, Mrs. Pastore sent another e-mail. "Thank you for lowering the music level. I have been a frequent shopper at Leonard's, from garden flowers to fresh mozzarella (by the way we love) so I will be very happy to try again. Thanks for the fresh produce and fruit and reasonable prices."

Leonard says Mrs. Pastore's reply "made my day." The exchange made the Pastores committed customers of Tom Leonard's Farmer's Market.

"I was very surprised," Mrs. Pastore said in an interview a few days later. "Other store managers don't seem to want to accommodate their customers the way Tom does. We were 100 percent turned around." A few days after the e-mail exchange, the Pastores showed up at the store again. They sought out Leonard to thank him in person, and even posed for a picture with him. "I thought he did a superb job," Mrs. Pastore said.

"Only happy customers come back," Leonard says. "If a business doesn't take good care of its customers, they don't come back."

When he talks about his store, Leonard keeps returning to two themes: "Selling the freshest" and "providing the best value."

To maintain freshness throughout his product line, Leonard and his staff conduct a full physical inventory of what's on the shelves and in the display cases every single day.

One customer at a time is how Leonard plans to grow his new business. "We listen to the customers. We find the freshest produce anybody can find. We save the customer money. That's the way to grow," he says.



Bettie Adie's cart is loaded with strawberries, blueberries, Bing cherries and Montana Gold bread as she makes her way out to the parking lot in front of the store.

"I live in far Western Hanover County, but this is worth the trip. It's really first class," she says.

"The produce is absolutely beautiful and very reasonably priced. Supermarkets are so expensive. I can save money here."

Then she points up to the market's animated display of dogs, who have just launched into the theme song from "The Beverly Hillbillies." "And I just love those little guys up there," she says with a grin.