

CHAPTER 11: PERFORMING CUSTOMER SERVICE AT COMPETITIONS

11.1 COMMON CUSTOMER SERVICE TASKS AT COMPETITIONS

This section discusses, in detail, common tasks required of the blue team with respect to customer service at cyber defense competitions.

11.1.1 SETTING UP AN APPROPRIATE VOICEMAIL GREETING

As technology advances, organizations are moving towards newer technological methods, encryption enabled services, VPNs, telecommuting, the Cloud, etc. One technological item which is still a staple in almost every organization is a telephone. It is important to ensure that an organization is appropriately staffed such that the telephone is answered when calls arrive. That said, even the best organization cannot always ensure that every call is answered. In the case that a staff member is not able to field a telephone call, it is integral to the continued success of the organization that an appropriate voicemail greeting is in place.

There are many components to an effective voicemail greeting. The first component to be addressed is the actual language and tone of voice used. Jackie Silver, a voice artist who has been in the industry for over 25 years, states that:

“Voice is the first connection a client has to the business - make it count!” [68]

It can be convenient to use some sort of text to speech software or an automated voicemail system to record a greeting, but this can lead to the perception that an organization is not personal with their clients. In a world which is shifting towards automation, remaining personal with clients can be the leg up that an organization has over its competitors. A more personal greeting can also improve the overall mood of the caller, thus reducing the likelihood that a customer will be difficult over the phone. Silver states:

“Using a warm, relateable person for a business voice over is preferable to the automation-sounding, monotone voice that many businesses choose.” [68]

By ensuring that the voicemail greeting is personal, genuine, and warm, an organization sets a positive first impression with the client.

The next component of a quality voicemail greeting is brevity. If a client has gone the route of calling you on the telephone, they are likely hoping for a quick response rather than a delayed response via email. Ensure that your voicemail greeting does not leave the client waiting for an extended period of time before they can record their message. In an article from Statup Stockpile, author Ryan Bozeman suggests that an organization should aim for a voicemail greeting last 20 seconds. Less than 10 seconds likely means that the speaker was speaking too fast or all relevant information was not relayed. He states that a voicemail greeting should never exceed 30 seconds [69].

The next component of an effective voicemail greeting is ensuring that all pertinent information is relayed to caller. Keep the voicemail greeting short and to the point, but do not leave out necessary details. A successful voicemail greeting should include the following items:

- The name of the individual or organization the caller has reached.
- Express your apology for lack of availability.
- Normal business operating hours.
- Alternative methods of contact (if applicable).
- Request a message including the caller's name (and organization if applicable), a call back number, and the reason for the call.
- A salutation.

An example of a high quality effective voicemail greeting script is shown below:

*Thank you for calling **XYZ Corp.** We apologize in advance for missing your call. Our business operating hours are **8 AM to 5 PM Pacific Time, Monday to Friday.** You may also contact us at **customerservice@xyzcorp.com.** Please leave your name, telephone number, and your reason for calling today, and we will return your call as soon as possible. Please record your message at the tone and have a wonderful day.*

More examples of effective voicemail greetings are available in Silver's article [68], Bozeman's article [69], and an article from OnSIP [67].

11.1.2 PERFORMING EFFECTIVE CUSTOMER SERVICE

In order for an organization to achieve lasting success, it is important that customers and clients have the ability to have their questions answered. This leads to a necessity for a customer service center of some sort. This does not inherently need to be a full team of 50 individuals, but can even just be a single individual who is on hand to assist customers and clients with their needs. Digital.gov, a product of the U.S. General Services Administration notes that customer contact centers serve as an effective liaison between the customers and the organization [63].

Effective customer service starts with establishing standards which must be met when interacting with customers. Concrete standards allow each individual in the organization to have an outline of what items must be met when interacting with a customer and allow individuals to hold them self and others accountable. Example standards are listed as part of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services' Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality's Strategy 6Q Standards for Customer Service [64].

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management lists in a 1997 report that effective customer service is achieved by incorporating the following items into an organization [65]:

- **Goal Setting and Measurement:** Set goals and measure whether they were achieved.

Without a quantifiable or verifiable method of assessing goals, it is challenging to identify areas of strength and weakness.

- **Goal Setting and Feedback:** Having concrete feedback helps lead an organization to reevaluate its goals and set new goals which have more positive feedback.
- **Measurement and Feedback:** It is important that the measurement system is not shared with the same individuals who will be providing feedback. This can lead to skewed feedback.
- **Measurement and Rewards:** For individuals to participate in any exercise with real effort, there must be some sort of reward for participating in a genuine, honest manner.
- **Feedback and Rewards:** An organization must recognize individuals who have solicited positive feedback from customers. This leads to positive reinforcement for the individual as well as setting a standard for others to follow.

This process is exemplified in the following statement by Connellan and Zemke [66]:

“... if you set both a standard and a goal; if you involve individuals or teams in setting their targets; if you empower individuals and teams to make decisions on their own; if you combine goal setting with measurement of customer satisfaction tracked back to both individuals and teams; if you add positive coaching; if you celebrate progress; and if you use regular positive reinforcement for the right set of behaviors, then goal setting is a powerful, positive tool for sustaining Knock Your Socks Off Service.”

To review, in order to provide effective customer support and service, an organization needs to identify what the needs of the customers are. Next, the organization must set goals which aim to satisfy the customer needs. Using some form of measurement, customer satisfaction needs to be reported. Individuals or teams which solicit positive customer feedback need to be rewarded.

This process should be repeated until customer satisfaction is at an acceptable level, and then continuously repeated as customer needs may change over time.

11.1.3 DIFFUSING CHALLENGING CUSTOMERS

Despite the best efforts of the customer service staff to please all customers, there will be times where a particularly challenging customer will require assistance. A customer can be challenging for a number of reasons, the one addressed here is the upset customer. This customer has a problem, they don't have a solution, and are already upset coming into the telephone call. Part of providing effective customer service is understanding how to diffuse the challenging customer. In a short article, author Mor Assouline walks through four techniques for defusing an angry customer. His techniques are to [74]:

1. Listen
2. Apologize
3. Solve
4. Thank

Mich Solomon, in an article on Forbes, provides a separate but similar approach to turn an upset customer into a satisfied customer. Solomon's approach, titled AWARE, consists of the following techniques [75]:

1. Acknowledge
2. Widen
3. Agree
4. Resolve
5. Acknowledge

Both strategies share a common theme, put the customer first. Start by acknowledging the customer's concern. Regardless of how an individual feels, they should validate the customer's

concern. Listen to exactly what their concern is and try to recognize what they are upset about. Present yourself as a caring individual who is genuinely interested in their concern. The upset customer is typically going to have a lot to say, so allow them to speak. Just hear them out. At this point, feel free to either apologize, agree, or both. The goal here is to present empathy for the customer and their concern. After showing empathy, move on to actually solving the problem. This is ultimately what is going to diffuse the angry customer. Be sure to include the customer in your solution. Do not just leave them hanging and then present a solution which they are unhappy with. Rather, involve the customer. Walk through the solution with them as it is developed, regularly asking for their feedback. This will help ensure that the solution is satisfactory for the customer. At the end, be sure to thank the customer for their time.

It is very important that an individual avoids becoming upset or annoyed with the customer. This will only further escalate the situation and may lead to the loss of a customer. Maintain poise and composure despite the upset customer. The customer may be unruly, using foul language, etc. Do not view this as an opportunity to be upset with the customer or lecture them. Simply listen and identify the important details in the slurry of words which may be coming from the customer. While it is important to make the customer happy, do remember that no organization policies, including data classification policies, should be compromised in the process. Defusing the angry customer is one of the more challenging aspects of customer service, but a very necessary skill to run an effective customer service center.