





Customer Service Skills

Training Manual

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Module Two: Customer Service Techniques

Training Outline

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You'll never have a product or price advantage again. They can easily be duplicated, but a strong customer service culture can't be copied.

Jerry Fritz



Workshop Objectives

At the end of this module, you should be able to:

- Know how to keep yourself in shape for a service encounter
- Know how to identify and address customers' needs
- Demonstrate excellent communication skills that enhances customer relationship.



Customer Service begins with you

Customer service means different things to different people. To some it means going beyond what is expected of you. To others it means adding value and integrity to every interaction. Still, to others it means taking care of customers the way you would take care of your grandmother. We might all define customer service a little differently, but we can all agree on one thing: to provide great customer service, you need to put energy and enthusiasm into your interactions with customers. Great customer service begins with you having a great attitude.

Appearance Matters!

As a society, we are all aware that a lot of emphasis is put on individual appearance. To some extent this is actually something regrettable, as it means that people are prepared to judge a book by its cover. Conversely, however, a company should be aware that the opinions of its customers matter. Those opinions may not be the same as the people working within the company, but when it comes to ensuring the success of a business they still matter. In fact, the saying "the customer is always right" could be considered to apply here. Most customers wish to be treated with courtesy and to deal with individuals who look like they have made an effort with their appearance. Therefore, it is beneficial to ensure all staff takes heed of this fact.

This does not mean that in every business it is important for customer-facing staff to be Stepford-style automatons who look, act, and behave as though they had been prepared for their role to ensure that every business operation is the same as the last. A certain amount of character, which includes a modicum of individuality, is desirable in a customer service situation or encounter. It is important to maintain standards, but also to give the appearance that each transaction is different from the last.

Even if the transaction or the enquiry is not carried out in person, it is still important to consider the matter of appearance. "Appearance", after all, is not just a term which applies to physical appearance. It also refers to how things seem. If a customer is dealing with staff on the phone or via e-mail, they will be well advised to ensure that their professionalism does not slip here. Often in businesses which do not directly face the customer – such as call centers – the dress code is "relaxed". You can wear jeans and a t-shirt, or whatever feels comfortable, as long as your performance is polished and professional. Some businesses prefer to have a strict dress code even in these circumstances, feeling that dressing smartly equates directly to a smart performance.

The Power of a Smile

Being positive and friendly in customer interactions plays a major part in ensuring that a customer walks away from the experience having felt that everything was done in a way that suggested the customer is valued. This may impact on how much they spend in a single transaction, and just as important, whether they return to the business with more customers, because of their positive experience. In this respect, a smile can make a world of difference to how the customer feels about their treatment, and about the business in general.

Having a smile on your face makes you look more welcoming. It is something that cannot be overestimated as a customer service and retention tool. If you were to walk into a store, and saw two sales assistants – one who looked cheerful and open and one who looked like they had just been told to pay house rent – instinct would dictate that you approached the cheerful one should you have an enquiry about the item you wanted to buy. Therefore, it is advised that in dealing with customers you are always alert, friendly, and personable. Even if you are not particularly feeling that way, it has been argued by body language experts that the act of smiling releases endorphins which make you feel happier. So it is worth making the effort to put a smile on your face however you are feeling.

Staying Energized

We all experience low points during the course of the work period, but there are ways to boost your energy when it is lagging.

- Take a walk, even if it's just to the restroom
- Drink a glass of cold water
- Be sure to eat a good breakfast and lunch
- Plug into others – being with energized people, keeps you energized!
- Listen to up-beat music
- Try to stay humorous.

A working day usually stretches from around 8-9 AM and goes on until approximately 5 PM. Though there is some movement in these times, the typical structure of a staff timetable is that a working day will extend to around eight hours, and will involve some short breaks in between times. The importance of this information is that it can be difficult to maintain a positive demeanor for eight hours straight, especially if you are thinking about matters beyond the workplace. Eight hours of appearing positive and upbeat can be the hardest part of a job, without even considering the brass tacks of the job – ensuring that the customers are seen to.

It is essential in this respect that anyone in a customer-facing job approaches their day in a sensible, structured fashion which allows them to get the most out of themselves. Staying energized is often difficult, but as long as you develop a routine for dealing with the difficult events, then you can find a way to deal with even the dreariest day. There will be times during a working day when you would like nothing more than to go and get your jacket and walk out the door. However, if we all did that whenever we felt like it, the chances are that we would mostly be out of a job.

It is essential to find something that allows you to break out of the “lows” that anyone will experience during a working day. These lows are common to all of us, and we all have different ways of dealing with them. One of the most commonly used methods of shaking out of this kind of torpor is a “change of scenery”. If you have a moment and can leave the production floor, it is beneficial to get up and go somewhere else for a moment. Maybe it will be something as simple as going to get a drink or get some fresh air. Whatever you do, it should be vastly preferable to scowling at every customer who simply asks you the price of a certain item.

It should also be mentioned that making the effort to have breakfast in the morning – even if you feel as though eating is the last thing you want to do – can be of huge benefit. It allows you to maintain energy through the morning, which for many people is the hardest time of day to stay positive. It may be a cliché, but making sure that you don’t skip breakfast can go a very long way to keeping you energized all through the day.

Staying Positive

We can’t control all of the problems and irritations that come up during the day. We can control our attitude and how we react to the situation. Remember: you need to be happy with the reflection in the mirror.

Here are some tips on staying positive:

- Rearrange or redecorate your workspace
- View negative situations as a training session for your future, use them to your benefit, they will help you later in life.
- Find ways to spend more time on tasks you enjoy
- Look for opportunities to learn new things
- Realize that you can find positives in any negative situation. Albert Einstein said: “In the middle of every difficulty lies opportunity.”

At the beginning of the day, think about one important thing that you want to accomplish that day. Think about why it is important. Tell yourself that you have the ability to accomplish it successfully. Congratulate yourself when you have accomplished what you set out to do.

Positivity is something that is very hard to create out of nothing. It occurs naturally in some people, and others are deficient in it. Positivity can result from good things happening at the right time – or for that matter at any time. It can act as an energy source on which a person can access to bring the best results time and again. Whether you are a boss looking for good results from a sales team, or a salesperson looking for your own positive results, it is essential to bear in mind that the best results come from situations where the individual, and those with whom they work, feel that positive energy that feeds into a good performance.

Most of us have spent time with positive and negative people. Although those who are negative may be so for perfectly good reasons – past experience may have seen them consistently fail to get what they want – they can be difficult to deal with, even to the point where they seem to sap the positivity from those who have it in supply. This is something that you will tolerate from a friend, but in a workforce it is essential to stop this kind of negativity by whatever means necessary. Having a bright outlook can be difficult, especially when luck seems to be in short supply, but this is what separates exceptional customer service providers from the rest.

Outlook and attitude are essential in any job, but particularly in one where you will be dealing with the public. It may seem that the day is not going your way, and that you are permanently going to be frustrated, but the essential thing to remember is that if you project this mood on to the customers, you will certainly have a bad time. Positivity is hard to manufacture out of nothing, so sometimes you have to project it when you are not necessarily feeling it. Eventually, if you keep this faux positivity running for long enough, it will create the conditions for real positivity to take hold and thrive. Of course, if you already feel it so much the better – as far as possible you should share it and allow it to become a prevailing condition.



Identifying Customer Needs

When you go to the doctor and he asks you what the problem is, do you tell him to guess? When you go to the dentist and he asks you which tooth hurts, do you tell him to figure it out? You would assume the answer to both questions is NO! You realize that doctors and dentists need information from you to make an accurate judgment on what the issue is.

The same holds true for dealing with any kind of customer. A patient in a doctor and dentist office is just one type of customer. That customer is buying a type of service. He or she is either getting a tooth fixed or a medical problem treated. The only way to do this quickly, accurately, and economically is to involve the individual in the process.

Every customer is different in some way. They have different needs, different problems, and have different backgrounds. Because of this, they are going to require customized approach - this means that you are going to have to get information from them to determine what it is they need.

Sometimes the customer will volunteer the information by just walking up to you, or calling you on the phone to tell you exactly what they need. In this case, you would either tell them that you sell that product and show them where it is or how they can get it or you would say we don't sell that product but we have something similar or better.

Usually you have to ask questions to get the information you require. You need to do this for several reasons. Some of these reasons are:

Customers don't know what information you need

Very often customers will not be aware that we require certain information to get them what they need. For example, a customer going into an auto parts store to buy an oil filter may not be aware that there are three different engines in the make and model car the customer owns. If the customer doesn't know that, they would not necessarily provide the information.

Customers don't realize there are several models with several different features

You can't best service a customer when you don't know what application they have in mind for a product. For example, if a customer wants to buy a washing machine, you would need to know how much wash they do each week to determine the size of washing machine they need. If the customer has eight children, they would need the largest size. If it were just a single person living in an apartment, the smallest sized machine would be a good choice.

Customers are not as knowledgeable about certain products as you are

You have the advantage of seeing specification spreadsheets, products introductions, features and benefits sheets etc. On the products and services that you sell you usually know how one brand compares to another. Customers may not have that information and therefore may not know what the best choice is for them.

Customers don't know everything that exists

You know what is available to address certain needs or problems. A customer may come in to purchase product A not aware that your product B is a much better solution to their problem or need.



Addressing Customer Needs – The five P's

To be able to address the needs of your customers, knowledge of your organization is important. The five P's will help you sort and organize the many things you should understand about your company so you can help meet the needs of your customer. They are:

- People
- Products and Services
- Policies
- Procedures
- Places

People

Nobody can do everything on their own. We all need help from others to do our jobs the best we can. The more people you know in your organization (not just your team) the better you will be able to serve your customers. Get to know people throughout your company. Make sure you know people at all levels and on every team in every department. Know and serve your internal customers well.

Having good relationships with people in every department can help you cut through the red tape and get right to the answers you require as you work to address the needs of your customers.

Products and Services – Addressing your customers’ needs would mean you need to know the products and services your organization offers. You need to know their features, benefits, prices, and competing products. You also need to know what problems they solve or what opportunities they can help create. The more you know about your organization’s products, the better you can suggest and advise your customers.

A great way to get to know your products is through customer application examples. Collect stories and testimonials about how your company’s customers have used its products to meet their needs. Document these examples so anyone in your company can use them. The information is valuable and will help you to do more for your customers.

Policies

Your organization’s policies tell you what you would be unable to do for customers. They give you boundaries. Knowing your customers’ policies can save your customer’s time. Some things simply cannot be done. If you know this upfront, you can help your customer understand what you can and cannot do.

Other policies might be flexible. If you are aware of where the rules can be bent, you can help your customers have a more realistic expectation of how best you can address their needs.

Procedures

It’s almost impossible to assist your customer if you do not know how your organization does things. Procedures are the blood of a business because they let us know how to get things done. And, if things are not working well, established procedures provide a place to start to fix the problem.

Know all you can about the procedures your company uses to deliver its products and services. Only then can you help your customers navigate the maze and get what they need.

Places

If your organization has more than one location, you need to know about it. Sometimes, different locations are similar, as with retail stores. Often they have different functions, such as a warehouse and a showroom.

Either way, you should know about every location your company has and what is done at each one. Find out how each location plays a part in helping your organization deliver its products and services. You can put this knowledge to work as you meet your customers’ needs.

Knowledge is King!

When in a customer service encounter, your success or failure is often hinged on the information you have available to you. This information may take the shape of the knowledge of any of the 5 P's combined with your interpersonal skills. The information you give to customers must be accurate, complete and appropriate for the situation. By accurate, it means that the information is true and factual. It should not be based on a guess or generality. Every attempt must be made to provide correct information.

Complete information refers to provision of details and guidelines to help your customer through usage of a product or service. Imagine a doctor prescribing a drug to you but leaves out the times of the day you are to take the drug!

Appropriate information means that the information you provide to the customer must pertain to the problem at hand. For example, if a customer has a problem with the headlights of a car, you should not give information on how the horn is connected! Any information that does not directly pertain to the headlights would be considered inappropriate.

Most of the time, you will be the first, and only contact the customer will have with your company. Your entire company will be judged by the quality and relevance of the information you provide. Providing customers with wrong, incomplete or inappropriate information will not yield a sale, or will prolong the resolution of a complaint and make the situation worse.

Communicating with the customer

Being able to address the needs of the customer is important. However, what is perhaps more important is how we communicate solutions to the customer. Customers may not always get what they want but they can always leave the service encounter feeling satisfied.

Below are wrong phrases and appropriate alternate phrases that should be deployed when conversing with the customer.

Hearing the word "NO" – Everyone hates the word "no". It is de-motivating, discouraging and disinteresting. You will hear this word throughout your life as a customer and as a service provider. "No" is tantamount to "bad service". "No" is easy, cheap, unproductive and negative - It means failure.

Unfortunately, "no" is the word we most often hear when a new idea, request or concept is introduced. Admittedly, there are times when you will have to say "no", but focus on what you can do for the customer (accentuate the positive) and not the negatives of the situation. Better to say "What I can do is ..." and demonstrate that you can care and want to provide quality service despite your current limitations.

I don't Know – Good service means never saying, "I don't know" When a customer hears "I don't know," they hear, "I don't feel like finding the information you need." Better to say, "I'll find out" or "Let me look into this and get back to you as soon as possible."

That's not my job/department – When a customer asks you to do something that you do not know how to do or do not have the authority to do, become a catalyst by leading the customer to the person or department who can help him/her solve the problem. Better to say, "Let me transfer to the person who can immediately help you with this problem."

You are right, that is bad - Many inexperienced service representatives think by sympathizing with the customer's plight, s/he will win over the customer rather than actually doing something to solve the issue. If a customer expresses annoyance or frustration, do not make it worse by commiserating with him/her. Empathize with the customer but seek to solve the problem.

Calm down – When customers are upset or angry let them vent (within reason) and they will eventually calm down. Telling them to calm down is belittling, and often serves only to infuriate them further. Better to say, “I’m sorry” or “I apologize” (when required).

This is one of the ideal phrases for customer service – it helps placate the angriest of customers and allows you to begin the process of solving a customer complaint or request. Apologizing does not mean you agree with the customer but it is a means to empathize and move beyond the emotion of the moment and negative impact.

Your issue/ Your Problem – Service representatives often make statements like “your problem...”, “your issue...” when addressing challenges customers are experiencing with products/service offered by their organization. Doing this makes the customer defensive and stifles resolution as you are stating that the customer is the owner or part of the problem. Looking at resolution together with the customer by saying “the issue you are experiencing...”, the problem you are facing...” is a better way to communicate.

I’m busy right now – It is not easy to juggle customers. You are often helping one customer when another calls or visits your service area. Asking a customer to be patient or politely asking them to wait is very different than putting them off and saying you are too busy to help.

Leaving them standing there or on hold are two of the mortal sins of customer service. “Being too busy” is tantamount to saying that you do not care and they are not important. Let the customer know that they are important and you are aware of their presence. Better to say, “I’ll be with you in one moment” or “Please hold and I’ll be right with you.”

Call me back – This expression conveys little interest on the part of the customer relation’s employee for the needs and wants of the customer. You should always call the customer back because you want their business and are responsive to their requests. Being proactive is part of good customer service.

That’s not my fault – If an angry customer accuses you of creating a problem, rightly or wrongly, the natural reaction is to defend oneself. However, this is not the best course of action. The customer is experiencing a challenge that needs to be solved. By resisting the need to defend yourself, and focusing on the needs of the customer, you can resolve the problem faster and with less stress and confrontation. Better to say, “Let’s see what we can do about the problem.”

You need to talk to my supervisor – This cliché of bad customer service has angered and frustrated customers for decades. Customers often ask for things outside the scope of your work or authority – maybe even outside the services/products provided by your company. While passing off these requests to your manager is a tempting option, it is better if you attempt to solve the problem yourself or directly go to the supervisor yourself and get a solution.

You become a service hero for the customer and the supervisor. Better to say, “Let me find that out for you”

You want it by when? – Customers often make unrealistic demands, especially when it comes to time. Your first reaction may be annoyance and you may want to make a snide or sarcastic comment. However, the best approach is to hold off on displaying a negative attitude and making a poor impression. Better to say, “I will call you right back after I find out if that is feasible.”



Module Exercise

- Customers are humans having basic needs. Mention a few.
- What difference does having a positive attitude make in a service experience?
- What efforts have you made to know your organization well in order to be able to provide stellar service experience?
- Mention more wrong phrases and their alternate right phrases that can be used in communicating with a customer.



Module Review Questions

1. Appearance is not important with businesses that do not have face to face interactions with customers.

a) True b) False

2. Which is not a good way to keep energized at work?

a) Humor b) Good breakfast c) Plug into others d) Quick nap under your desk

3. Viewing a negative situation as a training session or a learning experience is a great way to_____?

a) Be irritated b) Belittle a coworker c) Skip work d) Stay positive

4. It is better to show faux positivity than to show negativity.

a) True b) False

5. _____ is the odd one

- a) Policies b) Procedures c) Practices d) People

6. "The issue" should be said instead of "your issue" when addressing customer complaint

- a) True b) False

7. Which of the following phrases is a customer appropriate alternate to "I don't know"?

- a) "I'm sorry, I can't answer that question"
b) "I wish I could tell you"
c) "I have no idea"
d) "That is a good question, let me check and find out"

8. An information given to a customer must be accurate, complete and _____?

- a) Permissible b) Appropriate c) Popular d) None of the above

9. Usually you have to ask customer questions to get the information you require because...

- a) Customers don't know what information you need
b) Customers are not as knowledgeable about certain products as you are
c) Customers don't realize there are several models with several different features
d) All of the above

10. Staying energized may mean that you will do the following except?

- a) Listen to up-beat music
b) Try to stay humorous
c) Take a walk home and back
d) Drink a glass of cold water