



## *Chapter 2*

# *Customer Service Skills for User Support Agents*

**A GUIDE TO  
COMPUTER USER SUPPORT  
FOR HELP DESK AND SUPPORT SPECIALISTS  
SIXTH EDITION BY FRED BEISSE**

# Chapter Objectives

- The importance of strong relationships and good communication and interpersonal skills
- Reasons support agents must listen and read carefully, build and communicate understanding, and use verbal and nonverbal communication effectively
- How support agents develop a personal communication style
- How support agents develop an incident management strategy

# Chapter Objectives (continued)

- Strategies support agents use for voice and web-based communications
- Strategies support agents use for working with difficult clients and incidents and for resolving conflicts
- How developing an understanding of different personality types and work styles can help an agent
- How to build excellent customer service

# Communication and Interpersonal Skills Are Important to Learn

- *Excellent communication and interpersonal skills are often more challenging for new support workers to learn than technical or business skills!*

# A Customer Service Ethic

- **A customer-service ethic**
  - An organization-wide commitment
  - Shared by everyone
  - Client relationships and client satisfaction are the most important aspects of a business
- Goal: 100 percent client satisfaction 100 percent of the time

# Satisfied versus Dissatisfied Customers

- Satisfied customers are more likely to be repeat customers
- Dissatisfied customer incidents usually take longer to handle
- Dissatisfied customers generate:
  - Lengthy incidents
  - Repeated callbacks or help desk contacts
  - Complaints and ill-will
  - Incidents that must be rerouted
  - Product returns and refund requests

# A Customer-Service Ethic Is a Commitment

- Provide users with the information, service, or solution they need
- If a problem cannot be resolved, explain to the client what *can* be done
- Treat clients with respect and courtesy
- Communicate to clients when they should expect to receive the service or information they need
- Return calls or emails when promised

# Communication Skills for Customer Service

- Three essential communication skills
  1. Listen and read carefully
  2. Build understanding
  3. Respond effectively



# Types or Purposes of Listening

<b>Listening Type</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
Discriminative	- Learn about the user
Comprehensive	- Understand the user's message
Critical	- Analyze and evaluate the user's message
Therapeutic	- Identify opportunities for positive support
Appreciative	- Find enjoyment
Relational	- Develop rapport

# Listen Carefully

- To the problem description
- To the language used to describe the problem
  - A clue to the user's experience level
- To how the user describes the problem
  - Tone of voice
  - Use of technical terms
- Strategy: Look for a class in communication skills to build listening abilities

# Effective Listening Tips and Barriers

## Tips

- Avoid distractions
- Give the user plenty of time
- Summarize
- Probe for details
- Use attentive body language

## Barriers

- Focusing on your concerns
- Allocating insufficient time
- Talking instead of listening
- Talking to avoid silences
- Avoiding eye contact

# Effective Listening Tips and Barriers (continued)

## Tips

- Get the user's perspective
- Be positive and encouraging
- Speak clearly and concisely
- Match the user's proficiency level

## Barriers

- Responding defensively
- Lecturing the user
- Speaking rapidly
- Using technical terms or jargon

# Build Understanding

- Develop empathy with a client
  - **Empathy:** An understanding of and identification with a client's situation, thoughts, and feelings
  - Example: *"It sounds like you've had a very frustrating morning, but I think I can help you with this..."*

# Build Understanding (continued)

- Try to express the problem in your own words
- Communicate to a client that you view him or her as a person rather than a problem incident
- Techniques:
  - Use visualization
  - Use inclusive language: *We*, rather than *I* or *You*
  - Smile!

# Respond Effectively

- Recognize the importance of a sincere **greeting**
  - Icebreaker
  - Positive first impression
  - Sets tone
  - Example: *“This is Joel in Computer Support. Thank you very much for calling. How can I help you?”*
  - Tip: Don’t sound mechanical or rehearsed!

# Use Scripts Appropriately

- A **script** is a prepared sequence of questions and statements that covers several important parts of an incident
- May include decision points and branches to handle different situations
- Tips:
  - Don't read lengthy scripts or responses to questions
  - Restate the response in your own words



# Use Tone and Style Effectively

- How you communicate is often more important than the content of the communication
  - Example 1: *“The help desk agent provided me with adequate information, but I felt through the whole conversation that I was intruding on his time.”*
  - Example 2: *“The help desk agent couldn’t tell me what I needed to know, but explained why the information wasn’t available yet.”*

# Nonverbal Behaviors

## Use These

## Avoid These

### Posture

- Open stance
- Face user

- Fold arms or crossed legs
- Bowed head

### Facial expression

- Smile
- Express interest

- Frown
- Show boredom, impatience

### Eye contact

- Frequent but not excessive eye contact

- Focus on distance or feet
- Stare

### Gestures

- Use body movements

- Stiff or limited gestures
- Shifting weight

### Distance

- Comfortable distance

- Too close or too distant

### Voice quality

- Comfortable loudness
- Warm pitch and tone

- Shouting or whispering
- Monotone or sing-song

# Develop an Effective Personal Communication Style

- Use clear, succinct speech
- Speak slowly but not so slowly as to sound condescending
- Use short sentences
- Avoid a rising inflection at the end of sentences
- Avoid empty phrases
- Phrase communication with clients positively

# Develop an Incident Management Strategy

- **Incident management strategy**
  - Techniques, tools, and activities that support specialists use to move through an incident effectively and efficiently, from initial greeting to the end of the incident

# Goals of Incident Management

- Provide a user with information she or he needs
- Manage stress levels for both the user and support agent
- Ensure that the incident progresses from start to finish in an effective and efficient way
- Help each user be more self-reliant

# Resources for Incident Management

- Organizational policies on incident management procedures and expectations
- Strategies covered in agent training programs
- Observation and imitation of respected and experienced support agents
- Personal communication experience and style
- Feedback on strengths and areas for improvement

# Incident Management Guidelines

- Ask goal-directed diagnostic questions
- Be honest
- Say “I don’t know” when you don’t
- Apologize when appropriate
- Say “Thank you”
- Use incident management, not user management techniques
- Teach self-reliance

# Special Strategies for Voice Communication

- Why? Visual cues in communication are missing
- Telephone clients evaluate
  - Telephone menu system
  - Length of time to answer call
  - Initial greeting



# Telephone Dialog Skills

- Support agents learn effective ways to
  - Greet a caller
    - *“Hello, this is Margaret in the support center.”*
  - Put a call on hold
    - *“May I put you on hold while I find that?”*
  - Transfer a call
    - *“I’m going to transfer you to technical support.”*
  - Terminate a call
    - *“I believe that has solved the problem.”*

# CRM Magazine's Five Most Irritating Statements

1. *"Your call is important to us."*
2. *"Please take our survey following this call."*
3. *"That's our policy."*
4. *"We'll get back to you on that."*
5. *"I'll have to discuss this with my supervisor."*

Challenge! Describe some alternative wording you could use for each statement.

# Client-Friendly Websites and Web 2.0

- First generation (Web 1.0)
  - Primarily one-way communication directed toward users
  - A cost-effective method of communication with users
- Second generation (**Web 2.0**)
  - Facilitates interactive communication with users
  - Promotes collaboration among users
  - Emphasizes social (group) aspects of the web

# Website Tools

- User forum: organized discussions on topics
  - Thread: commentary on a single topic is grouped together and organized by date (oldest messages first)
- Blog: message posts by a commentator of interest to a user community
- FAQ: frequently asked questions
- Knowledge base: information archive

# Purposes of Support Websites

- Provide product information
- Take sales orders
- Facilitate access to technical support staff
- Provide software updates and downloads
- Facilitate communication with end users
- Encourage communication and collaboration among users
- Provide user forums and blogs
- Provide links to related sites

# Criteria for Evaluating a Support Website

## **1. Content**

- Accurate
- Up to date

## **2. Organization**

- Well organized
- Avoids information overload
- Avoids graphics that download slowly

## **3. Format**

- Organized by clients' needs
- Provides information in small units

## **4. Mechanics**

- Effective navigation aids
- Correct spelling
- Correct grammar

# Strategies for Difficult Clients and Incidents

- A **difficult client** is one who requires special handling strategies because the user is angry, not communicative, rude, or abusive.
- Focus on:
  - The specific problem
  - Getting the needed information to the client
  - Providing excellent customer service in a respectful manner
  - Getting on to the next incident

# Characteristics of Difficult Clients

Difficulty	Characteristics
Users who complain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• User is unhappy with features of products and services</li><li>• User is rarely satisfied with an apology or an explanation</li></ul>
Power users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• User thinks they have more technical knowledge than they actually have</li><li>• User indicates they should receive special treatment based on what or whom they know</li></ul>
Incidents that get off track	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• User is confused or provides contradictory or inaccurate information</li><li>• User is dissatisfied with lack of progress or problem resolution despite several attempts to solve the problem</li></ul>
Users who are upset or angry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• User expresses real or perceived grievances about product or support services</li><li>• User indicates dissatisfaction through verbal and nonverbal communication</li><li>• User loses the ability to communicate in a professional or productive manner</li><li>• User continually turns the communication back to the source of the perceived grievance</li></ul>
Users who are abusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• User employs inappropriate language or behavior</li><li>• User engages in personal attacks on a company or its representatives</li></ul>
Users who are reluctant to respond	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• User talks slowly, very little, or not at all</li><li>• User does not answer direct questions</li></ul>
Users who won't stop responding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• User continues to talk well after a problem has been resolved</li><li>• User changes the topic or relates personal experiences</li></ul>



# Users Who Complain

- Give ample opportunity for a user to voice complaints
- Use empathy
- Don't take the complaint personally
- Tip: Remember that complaints can be a valuable source of feedback about products and services

# Contacts by “Power Users”

A **power user** is one who is technically knowledgeable, or thinks he or she is, or who believes he or she warrants special attention or treatment

- Use inclusive language that makes the user feel like a member of the team
- Use an authoritative tone
- Tip: Trying to diminish a power user's sense of self-importance often leads to an argument

# Incidents That Get Off Track

- Refocus the incident
- Apologize for the lack of a prompt resolution
- Summarize the basic problem information
- Offer to continue to work toward a solution

# Users Who Are Upset or Angry

- Let upset users vent their anger
- Reassure users that the problem is an important one and that you are willing to help resolve it
- Remember that angry users may continue to vent before they are willing to work on the problem
- Avoid defensiveness
- Don't sound patronizing
- Tip: Work with an angry user to build trust

# Users Who Are Abusive

An abusive user is one who is rude, uses inappropriate language, or makes personal attacks on an agent

- Goals:
  - First transform an incident with an abusive user into one where the user is just angry (no longer abusive)
  - Then work to satisfy the needs of the user (the result is a successful incident)
- Follow the support organization's policies and procedures for this type of incident

# Users Who Are Reluctant to Respond

- Use very simple language
- Avoid technical jargon
- Try different kinds of questions
- Give positive feedback when the user provides useful information
- Suggest exchanging information in a different mode (email, chat session, telephone, remote access, face-to-face)
- Tip: Building trust with reluctant users takes time

# Users Who Won't Stop Responding

- Use behavior that indicates the contact is over
- Summarize the incident and describe the resolution
- Thank the user for contacting the support group
- Express your belief that the problem is resolved
- Use short answers that don't provide a lead-in to additional conversation or communication

# Strategies for Resolving Conflicts

- **Conflict:** occurs when end users and support staff disagree about
  - problem-solving steps
  - product and service evaluations
  - needs assessment project recommendations
  - other support and workplace issues
- Some conflict in work situations is inevitable due to differences in levels of expertise, roles, viewpoints and values.



# Barriers to Effective Conflict Resolution

- Allowing a conflict to fester without taking steps toward resolution
- Focusing on who is to blame for a problem or conflict
- Personal threats to users or team members to promote a viewpoint or “get even”
- Spreading rumors, gossip, or complaints about other team members
- Strident defensiveness in advocating a viewpoint or interest
- Intransigence when presented with an opportunity to compromise

**Figure 2-5** Barriers to effective conflict resolution

# Strategies for Resolving Conflicts

1. Seek early recognition and commitment from stakeholders
2. Open lines of communication among participants
3. Identify issues, assumptions and facts
4. Promote “bigger picture” understanding of objectives
5. Understand differences in roles, skills, work styles, personalities and expectations
6. Encourage active listening, paraphrasing and empathy
7. Develop skills in expressing disagreement, advocating positions and handling criticism
8. Search for compromise among stakeholders

# Customer Service and Personality Types

- **Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)**
  - A personality analysis tool commonly used in business and industry to identify worker personality and work style preferences

# Four Dimensions of Personality

- Where do you direct your energy?
  - Introvert (I) versus Extrovert (E)
- How do you process information?
  - Sensing (S) versus Intuition (N)
- How do you make decisions?
  - Thinking (T) versus Feeling (F)
- How do you organize your life?
  - Judging (J) versus Perceiving (P)

# Understanding the MBTI

- MBTI use help agents understand how users and coworkers view the work world and behave differently in it
- Two examples of 16 possible personality types:
  - ISTJ (Introvert, Sensing, Thinking, Judging)
  - ENFP (Extrovert, Intuition, Feeling, Perceiving)
- Each person is a mixture of the four types
- No personality type is *correct* or *best*
  - Most people are a mixture of pure types

# Comprehensive Client Services

- Excellent client service is based on specific values, attitudes, and actions
  - Clients are the primary reason for a support organization's existence
  - Willingness to take extra measures to satisfy clients
  - Ability to provide client satisfaction depends on adequate support resources (staffing, equipment, budget)
  - Excellent client service skills apply to telephone, face-to-face, and written communication

# Chapter Summary

- Communication and interpersonal skills are foundations of excellent customer service
- Listen to (or read carefully about) a user's problem description, language, and tone
- Build understanding by restating a problem and empathizing with the user
- Respond effectively with a greeting, the use of scripts, and an appropriate tone and style
- Nonverbal communication such as posture, facial expression, eye contact, gestures, and voice quality impact communication results

# Chapter Summary (continued)

- Practice to develop a personal communication style
- Develop a personal incident management strategy that builds user self-reliance
- Learn to use telephone dialog skills effectively
- A support website is cost-effective, but its design should be client-friendly and exhibit good writing skills
- Difficult incidents and users require special skills and strategies



# Chapter Summary (continued)

- Basic personality types (the MBTI) can help explain differences in communication, learning, and work styles among users and coworkers
- All forms of communication with users benefit from a comprehensive approach to client services