

Why you need to think about customer service

Without customers you don't have a business – it's as simple as that. Good customer service is absolutely essential to the survival and success of your company. It's not rocket science – often it's as simple as reminding yourself what you expect when you're the customer.

Above all, make sure your goods or services give customers what they want, when they want it. If you do that, you'll have a much better chance of keeping your existing customers, attracting new ones and growing your business. The old adage that the customer is always right is as important as ever.

Good customer service can help your business grow by increasing:

- the number of customers through positive word-of-mouth recommendations
- how much they spend
- how often they come back.

You can create a culture of good customer service that's second nature within your business by having a set of customer service rules or guidelines. If you have employees, make sure they are aware of the guidelines and, if possible, give them some training, either externally or in-house.

Customer relationships

At the heart of good customer service is your relationship with your customers. Things like thanking people for choosing you or dealing with them in a courteous, helpful and friendly way will ensure you make the right impression. A happy customer is more likely to come back – and recommend you to their friends, colleagues and family.

To provide the best customer service:

- understand how your customers expect to be treated and what they expect from your products or services
- ensure that your company has a customer service policy or approach that covers all aspects of your business
- keep looking for ways to improve.

Some basic principles of good customer relationships include:

- greeting customers and approaching them in a way that is natural and appropriate to them and the nature of your business (an undertaker will naturally need a different demeanour to a builder)
- encouraging good phone etiquette
- showing customers that you understand what their needs are
- being helpful – for example showing someone where in a shop they can find a particular product and passing on your expertise to a client with a questionkeeping customers aware of the benefits of doing business with you.

Admitting you can't help a customer but recommending some other solution – even another supplier – will still score highly with a customer.

Understanding your customers' needs

Each customer will have a different perception of what customer service means to them.

At the very least, customers will expect you and your staff to know your products or services – where everything is located, brand names, place of manufacture and price. They'll expect you to be expert in which service is right for them and how it should be used. The more you know, the more confidence you build in the customer.

Think about and promote the features of your service or goods. Ensure that you and your staff point out the benefits for the customer.

You also need to know your customers and what they want. Record what they are buying, how often and why. It's useful to get as much information as you can on your customers' lifestyle, occupations and interests.

Expected levels of service vary from sector to sector. Customers will have different expectations of customer service of a retailer selling a tin of beans compared to a solicitor guiding a client through the sale of their house. Research your marketplace to find out what your customers expect of your business in your location. This will help you tailor your level of service to suit your customers' needs.

Some businesses work well providing a 'no-frills' basic level of service but many will try to exceed customer expectations. This could be simply offering

extra advice. Whatever it is, your customers will notice when you make an extra effort. Just asking if there is anything else you can do for a customer can be enough to generate repeat business.

But remember a golden rule: don't make promises you can't keep.

Creating a customer service policy or approach

A formal customer service policy sets the level of service you aim to provide, and what you will do to achieve this. It's something that will need commitment from you and your staff: you'll need to plan it, develop it, implement it and sustain it.

Steps to creating an effective customer service policy include:

- thinking about what your customers need
- planning how you will meet their needs
- staff training
- implementing the policy, making sure all staff are confident with it
- sustaining customer service levels by reviewing changing customer needs and feedback
- encouraging and supporting staff.

Staff

It's not enough for the owners of a business to be red-hot on customer service – all of your staff need to understand why it's important if they're dealing with customers. Your staff are often the first point of contact for your customers, so it's important that they:

- have the right attitude
- are well trained
- enjoy their work
- contribute to improvements
- talk positively about your business.

You don't want the first point of contact at your company to be a surly receptionist who doesn't even look up when someone comes in, for example.

Your people need to work together to put the customer first. Staff should treat customers as individuals and listen to their comments, complaints and

requests – this all adds up to a great customer service attitude. Importantly, your staff should thank customers to ensure that they feel valued, important and needed.

Other actions you can take to improve employees' customer service abilities:

- rotate staff so they can increase their knowledge of other areas of the business
- encourage and support teamwork
- review your recruitment and selection procedures.

Systems and processes

The way your customers buy from you is very important. If the buying experience is frustrating or difficult, a customer may not even complete their first purchase, let alone return. Just as frustrating is holding important data about them that is wrong or lost. The following are some tips for your systems and processes:

- record customer service standards and relate them back to business goals
- include the best point-of-sale systems and other relevant technologies you can afford
- reward customers with a customer loyalty scheme
- record client details in a customer relationship management (CRM) database
- seek post-sale feedback from clients
- establish a customer complaints policy
- recognise and reward staff behaviour that you want to encourage
- review recruitment practices to ensure you employ the right front-line staff
- include a staff training programme and review staff performance regularly
- ask key staff what they already do to provide good customer service
- encourage ideas, suggestions and observations from all staff.

Complaints

Customer complaints are actually useful – you may learn something about your product or service, and they will let you know if your business is failing to meet customer expectations in some way.

Let customers know that you appreciate feedback and will investigate any issues. Listen to what the customer is unhappy about (often price, quality or delivery on time). Confirm the validity of each concern and offer a solution.

See complaints as an opportunity to build strong, lasting relationships with customers and improve your service. If complaints are handled poorly, customers may not just withdraw their business but also encourage others to do the same.

Measuring customer service

There are several ways to check your performance apart from the number of complaints you get. You could ask a friend to pose as a customer or 'mystery shopper'. Give them specific questions to ask your staff that will test their product or service knowledge, helpfulness and how long it takes. Alternatively, you can hire a professional mystery shopping company to do this.

Customer feedback is another good measure of your service. You could ask for feedback by handing out forms or cards but, these days, people are often asked to give their verdict of their customer experience online. This can be through an email to a customer after they've paid. Your website could also include a feedback function, such as a message board or a 'contact us' area. Social media is an increasingly important way to interact with customers.

Remember to share positive or negative feedback you receive with staff. But bear in mind that personal details about customers that you get as part of their feedback, whether you use it or not, must comply with relevant privacy laws.

If your customer service approach is working well it will keep your customers happy, which should help your business to thrive.