

The ABCs of Competitive Customer Service

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With regular access to products and services from around the world, consumers no longer use cost as their single determining factor when making a buying decision. They look at other factors like delivery policy and times, quality, and levels of service received. Often, the deciding factor for some people is how well they are treated and if their needs are truly considered and met by service providers. The key for this to transcend to customers is for every employee at all levels to take ownership for each customer encounter.

The following are some ideas for more effectively serving returning and potential customers.

Assume that every person with whom you come into contact is a cherished customer or potential customer and make them feel as such.

Begin each encounter with statements that make the person feel welcome and that you are truly there to assist them in whatever ways possible.

Create an environment on the telephone, via the Internet and in person in which customers can access the information that they need to answer questions, educate them, and aid in making an informed buying decision.

Decide on an appropriate course of action for resolution of problems or satisfaction of needs only after adequate information has been gathered through effective questioning.

Ensure that all employees have the same level of training and knowledge pertaining to products, services, and that they adhere to policies and procedures for dealing with all customer situations.

Find ways to make sure that service becomes second nature to employees throughout the organization. This includes creating an environment in which service providers are proud of the organization, themselves, and the service that they provide.

Give customers an opportunity to compare products and services available with that of competitors in order to see the value offered by your organization.

Hire talented, capable and enthusiastic employees then teach them the organizational policies, procedures, products and services. The latter elements can be taught, customer service aptitude cannot.

Institute return policies that are customer-friendly so that they leave every encounter with the organization with a high degree of comfort and confidence in their buying decision.

Just because a customer offers an objection to something you say does not mean that there is no interest in the product or service offered. It could simply mean that they have additional questions or concerns.

Keep in mind that you are there to serve the customer and that without them you do not have purpose for being in the organization.

Learn to appreciate that a customer complaint is an opportunity for you and the organization to improve and that it does not necessarily mean that you failed.

Monitor your language and body cues to ensure that you do not unintentionally send negative or conflicting (incongruent) messages to people.

Never criticize or make negative about one customer to another since this is unprofessional. If you do, chances are they will wonder, "What will they say about me when I leave?" and this could harm customer relationships.

Often when you are feeling down, are having a bad day, or just have other non-work related things on your mind, you could inadvertently create a negative service encounter. To prevent

this, talk about the issue with someone outside of work hours, write it down and decide to deal with it later, take a break and clear your head or if serious, ask for time off to deal with the issue(s).

Practice or role-play dealing with common customer situations with another employee in order to determine some strategies for dealing with them when they really do occur.

Quickly answer questions or resolve customer issues in order to keep them from getting out of hand, making the customer feel neglected or raising customer's emotions unnecessarily.

Rely on "gut reactions" when dealing with customers. Most people know when something is wrong or when someone else has an unspoken issue. When this occurs, solicit your customer's questions, comments, or input in a non-threatening manner.

Show your customers through words and actions that they are important and that you have their best interests at heart.

Think like a customer and try to imagine why they are saying or doing something in each service encounter. This may help head off any potential problems or relationship breakdowns.

Use your customer's title (e.g. Dr. Mr. Ms, or Mrs.) and last name whenever possible if you know it. As a show of respect, never address them by their first name unless given permission.

View each customer encounter as unique and do not try to apply a cookie cutter approach or solution, just because you did something in a similar situation in the past. This could lead to confusion or a breakdown in the customer-provider relationship.

Wait until you are sure that your customer is done or satisfied in a service encounter before abruptly ending it yourself. For example, on the telephone, you might say, "Thank you for allowing me to take care of this issue for you Ms. Reasoner. Is there anything else that I can assist with today?" Once they have indicated that they have everything they need, provide a sincere sounding closing comment and wish them a good day. For example, "If there is anything we can help with in the future; please do not hesitate to contact us. Have terrific evening Ms. Reasoner."

Xplain policies, procedures and processes in lay person terminology without the use of jargon or other technical terms that your customer may not understand. Remember that just because you know something and have mastered it, does not mean that someone else can quickly do likewise.

Your zest and passion for your job, products and services are important in helping get a customer to make a timely buying decision.

Zero in on ways to point out benefits of a product or service to your customers; not on the features or physical aspects of it. The latter does not help a customer see the value of making a purchase.

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