Recharging Your Customer Service Skills

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Too many people who supposedly work to provide "customer service" seem to have gotten defensive and lazy on the job. I see it everywhere I go—people who have become defensive because they've apparently lulled themselves into believing customer service is an "us vs. them" game. It's "us" the company vs. "them" the customers. And we've gotten lazy because we're not taking the initiative we need to, to keep customers happy and coming back for more.

I'd like to suggest some new ways of looking at things, some ideas that perhaps you hadn't thought of before. These suggestions, I believe, will help you work better with customers to come up with the solutions to problems that you're in the business to come up with anyway.

Seven Key Reminders

We're all customers of other businesses, so we know what's expected from a business or service agency when we deal with them. Typically, our expectations fall into seven categories... seven categories of things that we, in turn, should also remember when dealing with people who are our customers:

1. People should come before papers. How many times have we gone into an office or store and waited while the clerk added up figures, shuffled papers, wrote a note, put things away in a file or otherwise fiddled with papers before looking up to say "Yes? May I help you?" This is one of the things that's an immediate turn-off to customers (and we all know it, because we've fallen victim to it).

It's a bit of a struggle sometimes, but those of us working in service-related businesses need to constantly remind ourselves to take care of the people first, papers later. The paperwork isn't going to go away. We all like to be neat and to tidy up one job before we go on to another, but it's really important to stop the paperwork whenever customers are near. They need to come first.

Every customer deserves the fastest, most efficient service we can provide. And, it is important to take care of the paperwork involved. In my office, I try hard every night to "clear" my desk before leaving the office (to clear up all pending business). You should, too. Don't hesitate to call customers back to make sure everything they needed has been taken care of. (What better way to make yourself and your business look good?) No matter what your "link" in the chain is, you're a vital part of the company. Everything the company is and does depends on you.

2. Your desk is a work place, not an 'unloading zone.' Those of us who work high-stress jobs sometimes forget that our desks are work places, not "unloading zones." I'll be the first to admit it—I get cranky at work! Although much of the time I catch myself before I do something I'll regret later, sometimes I will let my frustration show to my superior, co-workers, or others. This isn't fair to them, and it's not productive in a customer service environment. We may be loaded down with work or under stress or angry with something that's occurring in the workplace; still, that frustration does not give us license to be rude to family, friends, co-workers or worst of all, customers. Since most of us are under stress of one sort or another at work, please join me and take a few moments at the start of the day to remember: your desk is a work place, not an "unloading zone."

3. Be friendly before you know who it is or what they want. How many times have we all gone into an office or business and the person who met us there was rather cool toward us... until they found out we were somebody "important." Then they warmed up immediately. Don't let yourself get caught in this trap. Everybody is important to somebody, so be friendly to everyone, every time!

4. Phone callers have rights, too! Because so much business is done on the phone these
situation? What does the customer want? How can we give it to him/her?

6. Think in terms of what can be done, not what cannot. Plain and simple: the customer is not interested in what cannot be done.

7. Always remember ‘thank you.’ “Thank you” is a phrase that’s all too often forgotten throughout the customer service world these days. It seems like the vast majority of store clerks and salespeople now think a lot of other words mean the same as “Thank you.” Words like “is that all?” “There ya go,” “see ya,” “come back,” etc. Here in Oklahoma, the common rejoinder is “prishiate it!” I’m sorry, but all these phrases do not mean thank you! We all like to be thanked, so please don’t forget to use that phrase to close all customer dealings.

These seven points really help you define yourself as a good customer “server” and define your water treatment business as a good customer service business.

Those ‘Difficult’ Customers

Now, if you’ve spent any time at all in customer service, I can imagine what you’re probably thinking right about now. “Sure, all this stuff is great with the everyday customer.” But what about that real grouch, Mr. So-and-So? Or that dimwit Mrs. Whatzername. I hate dealing with them! They always cause us trouble!” etc.

I understand your frustration. I’ve been there. There are some customers you will simply never satisfy. But, if you work hard on crafting your everyday actions and responses to work in a more positive manner with everyone, you’ll find you have far fewer “Mr. So-and-So” and “Mrs. Watzzername.”

The fact is, your customers don’t expect you to perform miracles for them. They want only for you to do your very best to get them the services they need, when they want them. When you show that you are doing your very best, often the nasty, festering, big problems melt down to just little problems that can be quickly and easily resolved. Ways of showing that you’re doing your very best include:

- Upbeat, positive voice and eye contact.
- Calling the customer by name.
- Attention to details.
- Offering that little “extra” service your competition doesn’t.

It’s really important (especially with old “Mrs. Whatchzername”) to let customers vent. Understand that you will, by the nature of the business, be getting a lot of complaints and gripes. Don’t take them personally. People like to complain, and the utility/service company is often a good target. Recognize that people who are “venting” are looking just to release their anger and frustration and are not likely personally attack-
days, sometimes it's easy to get into a rut and treat telephone callers differently from people who come to see us in person. Please remember that the person calling on the phone has the same rights, and deserves the same respect, as the in-person customer. Take enough time to answer all questions; don't rush customers. Give every customer (in person or on the phone) 100% of your attention all the time.

A company I'm familiar with passed out little stand-up desk mirrors to all its people who answer the phone and have the first contact with customers calling the office. The mirror is used to remind the customer service technicians to smile when they answer the phone. That's because answering the phone "with a smile on" gives you a much more warm, pleasant, "can-do" type of voice. You'd be surprised how nice it makes you sound! Answering calls "with a smile on" will perk up even the crankiest customer.

Here are some other suggestions to make the most of your telephone contact with customers:

If you have other calls waiting, say politely and honestly. Rather than saying, "please hold," "who may I say is calling," "one moment," etc. trip. Cut out all that stuff Talk like a real person on the phone! You'll be amazed at the respect you command. The customers will also appreciate your honesty.

Customers will be able to tell when you're listening and when you're not. Listen to their emotions as well as their words. Sometimes what they really need is someone who cares.

Always identify yourself when talking with customers. They will get to know you and have more respect for you if you are a "real" person and not just a voice on the other end.

The telephone is a critical communications tool. We need to use it successfully by being pleasant and courteous to everyone who calls, regardless of what they need. We are here to serve them, one and all. Of course, this does not mean telephone calls are to be taken ahead of people who walk in; it should always be first-come, first-served. This won't be a problem when everyone is working together as a team to see that each customer gets speedy, 100% urgent attention whether they call or come to the office in person.

5. Get down to the customers' level. Don't use any jargon or unusual descriptions that the customer won't understand. In our business, most customers you talk to on the phone won't know the difference between a "P trap" and a pea hen, so why confuse them? Just speak plainly, in matter-of-fact language, to get to the root of the problem. What's the

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ing you or your company.

Let them know you sympathize. Take a step to the left to get on their side. Tell them you understand their frustration (even if it’s a problem you can’t immediately solve). Become an ally.

Ask them “What can I do for you?” This is such a startling statement to the customer that often, they won’t be able to tell you—or they’ll ask for less than you expected. Just be blunt about it. What do they want?

Let them take part in the solution. Give them a choice of options (refund, exchange, credit, etc.). Give them reason to come back. Fixing complaints makes customers happy, and makes them want to come back. And if you’re dealing with people positively, they’ll want to come back to do business with you (personally) as much as they will to do business with your company.

Some suggestions:
- Everyone in your business must help solve problems/complaints;
- Stay calm, don’t get emotional; don’t take it personally;
- Act quickly to get the solution “ball” rolling;
- Follow through afterward—did everything go OK? If not, what can you do better next time?

Recognize too that, yes, there are some people in this world who will never be satisfied with anything you can humanly do. If you recognize that and remember it, then you will not take it personally when you encounter these people. Just do your absolute best—and feel good about it!

**In Conclusion**

I’d like to suggest some ideas for you that I think will really help you “shake up” your organization and make the company much more flexible and customer-oriented. These suggestions are from researcher Gary Steiner, who wrote the book, *The Creative Organization*.

- Include unusual types of people.
- Keep channels of communication wide open.
- Make lots of contact with outside sources.
- Experiment with new ideas. Give everything a chance.
- Don’t run the proverbial “tight ship.” Have fun!
- Reward people with ideas, even if it’s just a “thank you.”
- Evaluate ideas based on their merit, not on the status of their originator.
- Allow new, ad hoc approaches (team work)!
- Quit being stuffy and “safe” in decision-making. Take chances!

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Vice-President of The Swanson Group, a research, marketing and PR firm, Swanson got an early start in water conditioning working in his father’s North Hollywood, CA franchise. He was later general manager of a Rayne dealership.