

Customer Service: Creating a Solid Foundation



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Why is Customer Service Important?

Your reputation reflects the customer service you provide. **Good customer service** can also:

- Increase credibility
- Boost morale
- Improve work environment
- Improve overall experience for you, your customer, and/or colleagues

Service, in short, is not what you do, but who you are. It is a way of living that you need to bring to everything you do.
- Betsy Sanders

What is Customer Service?

Customer service is the process used to meet the needs of the people who use the services of your agency. It includes:

- How you help customers abide by the laws and regulations of your agency
- How you handle your colleagues, other agencies, and any outside source

Transactional customer service is your basic customer service skills and interactions such as answering phones, greeting customers, and meeting the basic needs of the customer.

Internal vs. External Customer Service

Internal Customer Service:

- Customer service you provide within your own agency
- Sets the tone for external customer service by creating a customer-based atmosphere

External Customer Service:

- All people, businesses, and agencies who use your agency's services
- Includes public and private-sector customers

Customers don't expect you to be perfect. They do expect you to fix things when they go wrong.

- Donald Porter

Customer Service Standards

Customer Service Standards are a set of agency expectations for dealing with a customer. These standards come from information gathered regarding what customers expect, what customers do, and what affects customers the most. These may include:

- Introducing yourself by name to all customers
- Greeting all customers with a smile
- Addressing the customer by his or her name
- Making sure customers understand standards
- Offering feedback
- Encouraging open lines of communication
- Ending an interaction by asking customer if you can be of further assistance
- Following up on services provided

Consult your own agency's policy for additional standards.

Customer Service in the Public Sector

As a government worker, your duty is to serve the people of Louisiana and to make the state a better place for all citizens.

Since your customers include everyone in the state, you must have a broad set of customer service skills. Each and every situation is unique and must be handled accordingly. As a state employee, you should:

- Clearly state your limitations
- Promote the image of an efficient and helpful state workforce
- Aim to fulfill your agency's mission with every interaction
- Give the customer a sense of being genuinely cared for

Your most unhappy customers are your greatest source of learning.

- Bill Gates

4 Basic Needs of Customers

Customers have 4 basic needs: to feel **welcome**, **understood**, **valuable**, and **comfortable**. If you can meet these needs, you are off to a great start in providing excellent customer service.

Welcome

- Be approachable
- Acknowledge customers
- Maintain positive tone of voice

Valuable

- Call customer by name
- Thank customers
- Offer solutions

Understood

- Use active listening
- Paraphrase
- Ask questions

Comfortable

- Give expectations
- Use positive, open body language
- Be genuine

Creating an Impression

First impressions are everything. Aim to start every interaction with a good first impression.

Positive:

- Willingness to help
- Responding in timely manner
- Appropriate appearance
- Using positive facial expressions and body language
- Polite, friendly tone of voice
- Taking responsibility
- Referring to customers by name

Negative:

- Not giving customers your full attention
- Putting customers on hold / screening calls
- Looking unkempt
- Using negative facial expressions and body language
- Negative, unfriendly tone of voice
- Blaming others
- Lacking proper manners

The customer's perception is your reality.

- Kate Zabriskie

Staying Positive

Negative statements aren't always rude statements. Sometime we are negative without realizing it. The key to dealing with customers is to always stay positive. Below are some examples of "negative" statements and how to make them "positive."

Positive:

- "I'll try my best."
- "I'll be with you shortly."
- "How can I help you?"
- "I'll help you locate the right person."
- "This is what I can do."

Negative:

- "I don't have time for that."
- "Hold on a minute."
- "What's the problem?"
- "That's not my area."
- "No, I can't."

Active Listening Tips

As you are acknowledging the customer, listen to every word that is being said. Customers can tell whether or not you are actively listening. Here are some tips to improve your **active listening** skills:

- Stop speaking and just listen
- Focus on the speaker
- Remove distractions
- Encourage speaker to continue
- Empathize and put yourself in the speaker's place
- Repeat and/or paraphrase important information
- Ask open-ended questions
- Remain neutral
- Let the speaker finish speaking

Your customer doesn't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

- Damon Richards

Guidelines for Asking Questions

Open-ended questions allow the customer to give a more detailed response which help you get to the bottom of the issue. When interacting with your customers, your questions should be:

- Open-ended
- Specific
- Pertain to the customer's problem or request
- Allow you and your customer to get the most value and results from your interaction
- Done before taking any further action

Suggestions for Face-to-Face Interactions

In **face-to-face interactions**, customers are paying attention to every little thing you are or are not doing. Customer service excellence is not defined by any one thing. It's defined by all the little things that add up.

DO:

- Introduce yourself
- Use positive body language
- Refer to customer by name
- Create positive first impression
- Acknowledge customer at all times
- Focus completely on the customer
- Use active listening
- Paraphrase what customer says

DON'T:

- Use defensive body language
- Ignore the customer
- Allow distraction to get in the way
- Assume you have answered all of the customer's questions
- Assume your customer knows what you do

Customer service is just a day in, day out, ongoing, never ending, unremitting, persevering, compassionate, type of activity.

- Leon Gorman

Phone Interactions Guidelines

Although tone is the biggest part of **phone communication**, there are other things that affect customer satisfaction on the phone, too.

DO:

- Give your name and name of department
- Answer calls within 3 rings
- Smile – you can hear it
- Use a positive tone
- Assist customer with finding a solution and/or the appropriate person to handle request
- Ask before putting customer on hold
- Thank customer

DON'T:

- Screen calls to avoid dealing with customers
- Use sarcasm
- Carry negative emotions into your interactions
- Handle requests that are outside of your abilities or knowledge
- Leave a customer on hold for more than 30 seconds
- End a call without assisting the customer in some way

Email Tips

Email is also an important part of customer service. From using proper email writing techniques to content, your job is to provide customer service and make each customer's experience a good one.

DO:

- Use appropriate language and grammar
- Have a greeting and a closing
- Give time frame of proposed solution
- Set automatic replies when out of office
- Provide contact information in signature for all emails
- Provide visual representation when appropriate
- Use simple font in blue or black

DON'T:

- Use all caps
- Use loud or distracting signatures or themes
- Add unnecessary people to conversations
- Use emoticons, slang, profanity, abbreviations, or acronyms
- Email when you are angry
- Use complicated or multi-colored fonts

The more you engage with customers, the clearer things become and the easier it is to determine what you should be doing.

- John Russell