The Customer Service Survival Kit: Customer Service Essentials

Point of Contact Group
P.O Box 4023, Ithaca, NY 14852
www.pointofcontactgroup.com

Course objectives

- Improve your interpersonal skills with customers.
- Have shorter, easier customer transactions.
- Know how to handle any customer in any situation.
- Learn how to work better with less stress.

Customer service: more than just "a good attitude"

- Great customer service has less to do with personality, and more to do with skills, than most people think.
  - "Nice people" who can't service a transaction properly will leave customers unhappy.
  - "Average people" who apply good transaction skills professionally - and sincerely - will do a great job.
  - Rude, indifferent people will fail no matter what they do.
The good news

Customer support primarily consists of:
- Known situations which can be understood and managed.
- Specific techniques which have been proven to work.
- Common skills which can be learned.
- These techniques combine with your knowledge, your resources and your organization to solve customer problems.

Section I.
Basic Interpersonal Skills

The four basic interpersonal skills: The C.A.R.E. principle
- Communication
- Action
- Respect
- Empathy
Communication

- Much more than talking and listening.
- A very active process of:
  - Interpreting the customer’s statements
  - Making sure the customer is understood
  - Seeking confirmation and closure
- The single biggest factor in good rapport and smooth transactions

The art of active listening

- 1. Give your undivided attention, then respond.
- 2. Re-phrase what the other party says before your reply.
- 3. Share your knowledge of the situation.
- 4. Provide active feedback: silence isn't golden.
- 5. Summarize understanding and obtain buyoff.

“Staging” – a three-step technique for delivering bad news

- Introduce what you are going to say before you say it.
- Explain the reason for what you are saying as you are saying it.
- Empathize with the customer's feelings after you have said it.
**Taking action**

- Many service transactions end with "action items."
- Common source of frustration, and more transactions
  - As many as 60% of help desk calls are just to check status of an existing problem. (Bill Rose, SSPA)
- A good first transaction + no action = an angrier customer

**Demonstrating action to the customer**

- Use the "verbal receipt" approach:
  1. Provide a pro-active summary.
  2. Communicate action items clearly to the customer.
  3. Establish "ownership" of the transaction.
  4. Get action items and follow-up activities in the pipeline as soon as possible.

**Respect for the customer’s agenda.**

- Problems are often "gift-wrapped" with the caller’s feelings about it:
  - Level of urgency
  - Degree of expertise required
  - How critical the problem is to them
- Use the "playback" approach:
  - Because you ____, I am going to ____
  - Because you ____, I recommend ____
- Respect = acknowledging customer problems and customer’s agenda.
**Showing empathy**

- Customers want their problem solved *and* their feelings validated.
- We all fear appearing inept in front of other people.
- What you say has an important impact on your customer's self-image.
- Empathy frames transactions as encounters between peers.

**Ways to demonstrate empathy**

- Use "phrase substitution"
  - "You're exactly right." instead of "Correct,"
  - "I sure can" instead of "OK," etc.
- Acknowledge feelings and frustrations.
- Share common experiences.
- Reaffirm the customer's own competence.
- Reassure concerns and self-deprecating statements.

**Three “octane levels” of acknowledgment**

- **Observation**: Observe the other person’s feelings and reactions
  - "I can see how upset you are"
- **Validation**: Acknowledge the other person’s feelings are **valid**. This always involves describing **other people**
  - "No one likes to wait for a shipment"
- **Identification**: Identify with the other person’s feelings
  - "I wouldn't have liked that either. What happened to you was not fair."
Leaning into criticism

- Hand their complaint back to them
- Use “Wow” words
- Steal all their good lines
- The “look up, look down” rule
- Never defend yourself first

Section II: Your “Favorite” Customers, and How To Deal With Them.

Understanding the difficult customer

- Customers are human beings, like anyone else.
  - Personalities vary like any group of people.
  - You deal with people when they have problems.
  - Certain situations can be frustrating for nearly everyone.
- These transactions can be understood, and managed, like any other.
Preventing difficult transactions - doing the “can-can”

- Always respond with what you can acknowledge and can do - however small.
- You can avoid saying “no” much more often than you think.
- Extremely effective in preventing confrontations.

Using the LPFSA

- The what? The Low Probability Face-Saving Alternative
- OK to propose this as long as you explain that it is low probability
- Examples:
  - “We don’t usually do this, but let me check with the manager first”
  - “Before we completely give up here, there is one last thing we might try”

Understanding the customer crisis

- Factors which can cause a crisis situation:
  - Misunderstanding: Something well-intentioned is taken the wrong way.
  - Personality: Some customers are hostile and confrontational by nature.
  - Past history: A customer has had a bad past experience with your organization.
  - Different agendas: Certain situations or statements may be sensitive for some people.
  - Frustration level: A customer has a problem which is very important or has serious consequences for them.
Defusing a crisis – the “Triple A” approach

- Acknowledgement: acknowledge feelings and give the problem importance.
- Assessment: gather facts and assess the situation.
- Alternatives: set boundaries and sell alternatives.

A taxonomy of difficult customers

- The talk-a-holic
- The timid customer
- The untrained person
- The never-satisfied

Handling the Talk-a-holic

- Use the "acknowledging close":
  - Break in to the conversation
  - Enthusiastically acknowledge the last thing that they said.
  - Ask binary (yes/no/short statement) questions.
  - Continue as needed to control the conversation.
  - Done politely and with class, the talkative user will feel you are paying close attention and react well.
Handling the Timid Customer

- Use "feathering":
  - Listen carefully and intently.
  - Respond with a roughly equal mix of questions, feedback and reassurance.
  - Go slowly and avoid information overload.
  - Use plenty of courtesy and complimentary statements where appropriate.
  - Actively verify responses.

Handling the Untrained Person

- Refer them to more appropriate resources or training
- Protect the customer's dignity.
  - Use emotionally neutral phrases describing the situation and not the person.
- Know when to set limits.
- Keep your supervisors in the loop.

Handling the Never-Satisfied Customer

- Use the following four-step process:
  1. Ask them what they want.
  2. State the limits of what can be done.
  3. Acknowledge their concerns.
  4. Go back to step 1.
- Repeat steps 1 through 4 until problem is resolved or escalated.
**Should you ever hang up or walk away?**

- Abusive customer transactions require special handling. When these happen:
  - Do not argue with the customer.
  - Try to get the person's name and phone number for later contact.
  - Set limits on abusive behavior.
  - Escalate or report clearly abusive incidents proactively to your manager.
  - Know what to do ahead of time.

**Action items to take back to work with you**

- Always acknowledge a customer's position *first*.
- Respond rather than react.
  - Use key phrases aimed at situation, not person.
- Behave counter-intuitively.
  - Agree with criticisms.
  - Empathize with frustrations.
- Customer anger is rarely directed at you personally.

**Thank You!**

Point of Contact Group
PO Box 4023, Ithaca, NY 14852-4023
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