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CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE

Debra J. MACNEILL

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Customer Service Excellence

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PREFACE

Customer service is a pressing issue in this decade. In the ever-expanding market of today's competitive industries, few topics have received as much attention, both in time and money, as the need to have excellent service personnel. Providing quality service is a skill that will set you and your company apart from your competitors.

Customer Service Excellence is designed to build and maintain the critical skills necessary to be a dynamic and successful service professional. The front line individuals who work with customers every day will gain insight on customer behavior and attitudes and will develop strategies to create positive customer relationships in every encounter. Whether you are newly employed or a veteran with years of customer interactions, you will learn a practical approach to the thorny issue of customer dissatisfaction that will save you time and energy. Managers can use this guide as a part of their new-employee orientation and training programs or as a refresher course to keep service personnel focused on the company's goals and objectives.

Start by taking the Self-Assessment. This will quickly assess your customer service skills and knowledge and serve as a platform for your training. Work through the seven chapters at your own pace. The book presents opportunities for you to examine your own behavior, the key issues of your business, and to profile the customer interactions you encounter on a daily basis. Chapter 7 will help you to rate your own customer service skills. Prepare the action plan and you will be on your way to becoming a real service professional. Take the Post-Test when you have completed all the activities; it will reaffirm your mastery of the material.

Use the Skill Maintenance checklist to maintain your momentum after completing your training. Make a commitment to measure your success on an ongoing basis by completing the checklist at regular intervals. You and your customers will reap the rewards.

Debra J. MacNeill

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Debra J. MacNeill is principal and founder of DJM Consulting in Boston, Massachusetts. Her training specialties include designing and implementing customer service programs for banking, travel, and other industries. As a training manager for the Bank of Boston, Ms. MacNeill designed retail training programs with a focus on customer service. In addition, she has conducted numerous workshops on product knowledge and sales throughout the country.

About the Business Skills Express Series

This expanding series of authoritative, concise, and fast-paced books delivers high quality training on key business topics at a remarkably affordable cost. The series will help managers, supervisors, and front line personnel in organizations of all sizes and types hone their business skills while enhancing job performance and career satisfaction.

Business Skills Express books are ideal for employee seminars, independent self-study, on-the-job training, and classroom-based instruction. Express books are also convenient-to-use references at work.

Self-Assessment

Providing excellent customer service is both challenging and rewarding. Use this self-assessment to assess the way you presently handle your customers. The chapters that follow will confirm your service expertise or shed light on some new ways of effectively working with people.

	Almost Always	Sometimes	Almost Never
1. I don't let my personal feelings get in the way of serving my customers.	_____	_____	_____
2. I follow up with customers who have encountered problems with products or services.	_____	_____	_____
3. I thank my customers for their business.	_____	_____	_____
4. I make an effort to build partnerships with the people who work with me.	_____	_____	_____
5. I listen when customers complain.	_____	_____	_____
6. I explain product and service features using words that my customers understand.	_____	_____	_____
7. I am firm, but gentle, when saying no to a customer.	_____	_____	_____
8. I take the time to review my interactions with customers and learn from my mistakes.	_____	_____	_____
9. I look for solutions to problems with my customers.	_____	_____	_____
10. I communicate effectively over the telephone.	_____	_____	_____

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Building a Foundation

This chapter will help you to:

- Explain your responsibility to your customers.
- Define what customers expect from you.
- Examine the factors that lead to customer dissatisfaction.
- Explore the positive consequences of handling challenging customers.

“This is going to take forever,” thinks Charles Greenfield. “Why aren’t the other cash registers open?” He glances over to the other lanes where two salespeople, engaging in conversation, seem unconcerned with the lengthening lines.

José Santiago, the store manager, trapped by Sonia Washington, a customer with a product complaint, looks helplessly toward the other customers. Sonia continues, “I turned it on and the handle broke off. I only used it twice. Don’t you think I deserve a refund?”

“Ma’am, I’m sorry, but I have to get the other lanes open,” José pleads. “Why don’t you take this up with customer service?” He points in the direction of the rear of the store as he speeds off toward the checkout counters. Sonia looks down at the box in her hands, shakes her head, and leaves the store. When she gets back on the Senior Shuttle she recounts the whole story to her friends. “I won’t be shopping there again,” she announces. “Their prices might be right, but the employees are just plain rude.” All 10 heads on the shuttle nod in agreement.

Meanwhile, Charles, still in line, heaves a sigh. "I don't have time for this, Marge and the boys are waiting for me to take them to the beach. I'll just stop at the convenience mart on the way." ■

WHAT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY?

The first step toward working with a challenging customer is to understand your responsibility to that customer. Every interaction between you and a customer involves an internal contract.



When you accepted your position, you agreed to provide a product or service that the public needs or wants in return for some monetary compensation from your employer. Perhaps you went through an internal training program that identified the features and benefits of the product

your company provides, or perhaps you were coached on the job about how to provide service to your customer. Regardless, every time you approach a customer, in person or over the telephone, your interaction will be affected by personal guidelines that you have established over time through working with people.

Time Out

Take a few minutes to reflect on past and present customer interactions. How do you define your responsibility to your customers? What will you do for them as you go through a typical interaction? Where does your responsibility end and the customer's begin?

I am responsible for providing my customers with . . .

In doing so, I will . . .

It's up to the customer to . . .

You have just outlined your internal contract with your customers. This contract creates the foundation on which you will build a relationship with everyone who enters your place of business. It may include time frames, such as "I will answer the telephone within three rings" or "I will apologize to any customer that has to wait in line longer than five minutes." Keep in mind that your internal contracts need to be flexible. Sometimes it doesn't make sense to create a rigid contract at the expense of good service. You may find that a personal greeting has become standard, such as "Welcome to Marty's. I hope you enjoy the food." Undoubtedly, these habits have evolved over time through trial and error.

The Basics

How you define excellent customer service depends on what product or service you offer the public and on what type of customer services you have to offer. However, some practices are a function of common sense and courtesy. Basically, you are responsible for providing your customers with:

- A pleasant, friendly greeting.
- A positive and helpful attitude.
- A professional and accurate business transaction.
- An apology for any delay.
- A quick resolution to problems.
- A sincere thank-you for their business.

It sounds simple? Well, it truly is simple. As a provider of goods or services—whether you work in a grocery store, a local bank, a lawyer’s office, or a computer store—you are responsible for treating your customers with service that reflects a basic respect for their patronage. As you will discover, customers ultimately determine the success or failure of any business enterprise. If you don’t give customers what they want, when they want it, in a positive and helpful manner, they will take their business elsewhere. Some astonishing statistics reveal just how important your role is in customer service. Customers surveyed as to why they took their business elsewhere revealed the following:

- 3 percent moved.
- 5 percent developed other relationships.
- 9 percent left for competitive reasons.
- 14 percent were dissatisfied with the product.
- 68 percent left because of an attitude of indifference toward the customer by the owner, manager, or some other employee.

To avoid projecting an indifferent attitude to your customers, you need to examine who your customers are, what they want, and how you can provide them with what they need.

WHAT DO YOUR CUSTOMERS EXPECT?

Customers come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Naturally people walk through your door for a purpose. The sign outside your establishment is the first clue to what's inside—maybe the windows display some of your goods or the advertisement in last night's



newspaper caught their eye. No matter what caused them to enter or call your place of business, while they are within your boundaries, they are affected not only by your courtesy but by intangible qualities that will shape their perceptions of you and the business or service you offer.

Meeting Expectations

Whether your business is widgets, wedding invitations, or weight control, your customers want to be listened to, understood, cared for, and treated fairly, intelligently, and individually. They expect that you and your business satisfy certain requirements.

Quality	Expectation
Reliability	Performance is consistent; customers can depend on having access to the business or service when they need it, not when it's convenient; promises are kept; things are done right the first time; things are done on time.
Credibility	Materials are genuine; claims are honest; reputation is based on fact, not fiction; products are safe; salespeople are trustworthy; problems will be handled directly.
Appeal	Prices are fair; premises are clean, bright, and free of clutter; salespeople are dressed appropriately and conduct business professionally; products are displayed attractively; printed materials are neat and easy to read; telephone conversations are pleasant and convey accurate information.
Responsiveness	Business is easily accessible; salespeople are helpful and readily available; service is quick; communication is prompt; problems are solved in a reasonable time frame; customers are kept informed of the process.
Concern	Customers are treated as individuals; salespeople are empathetic; problems are viewed as opportunities to demonstrate reliability and credibility.

Perception Is Everything

A customer's perception is the key to service quality. A philosopher once said, "What concerns me is not the way things are, but the way people think things are." The same is true today. If what you do is not perceived as valuable by the customer, then it is not valuable. Managing customer expectations will lead you down the path to service excellence.

Who Are Your Customers?

Before you can tackle the issue of how to handle challenging customers, you need to know who your customers are and specifically what they want from your business or service. You may have received a package from your marketing department that gives the demographics

of people who buy your goods and services. That will give you information about your typical customer's age, sex, income, education, and so forth. But you need to look beyond the statistics and ask yourself, "Who are my customers?" With this question in mind, complete the following survey.

YOU AND YOUR CUSTOMER SURVEY

1. Describe the customers you see or hear from most often.

2. What do they want from you or your business?

3. What can you offer them?

4. How can you add value to your customers' experience?

The Inside Story. As you think about your customers, consider this. You work with people inside your organization every day—the receptionist, the floor manager, your boss. You interact with other departments regularly—human resources, payroll, and shipping. At times you depend on them to provide you with a service or product that you need in order to provide your customers with what they expect. At other times, they need you to supply them with information or goods that will enable them to perform their functions. You are both the giver and receiver of internal services. The people and departments you work with are as much your customers as the ones outside your organization who pay for your service or product. Service standards apply to all your customers, inside and out. Remember, the one you serve may be serving you someday.

Focus on the Positive. Creating positive experiences for your inside business associates contributes to your ability to meet the expectations of your outside customers. Try the You and Your Customer survey again, this time with an eye toward those you serve inside your organization.

YOU AND YOUR INSIDE CUSTOMER SURVEY

1. On what departments and/or people do you depend to provide you with the services or products you need to satisfy your outside customers?

2. What do you need from them?

3. What departments and/or people depend on you to provide goods or services that enable them to do their job?

4. What do they need from you?

Review your answers to the two customer surveys periodically as you go through the rest of this book to be sure you are aware what your customers expect from you.

WHAT CREATES DISSATISFACTION?

In Chapters 3 and 4, we'll probe deeper into how to discover what your customers want. Now, let's examine what our customers don't want, what makes them unhappy, and what we can learn from listening to customer complaints.

Focus on your most recent experience as a customer that left you with a feeling of great satisfaction. It might have involved a purchase you made or an encounter you had. Whatever you choose, it should be an experience that you could describe as outstanding. Without detail, list the characteristics of the encounter that describe the service. What made the experience memorable?

Now recall the most recent encounter you had as a customer that left you with a feeling of great dissatisfaction. What was the cause of that dissatisfaction?

The Dissatisfaction Equation

Was the satisfactory experience or the unsatisfactory experience easier to remember, describe, and record? Chances are you clearly remember the details of the bad experience. Perhaps you immediately told your family and friends the story of how you were mistreated, made to wait, or totally ignored. You were angry because your expectations were not met, and you needed to vent your frustrations. It's not hard to see why customers whose expectations are not met tell their tale of woe to at least 8 other people; 20 percent will tell as many as 20 others.

Common Customer Complaints. Take a moment to think about what causes your customers to be unhappy, disappointed, or dissatisfied. List the 10 complaints you hear most often.

Top 10 Customer Complaints

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____