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Outstanding Customer Service: The Key to Customer Loyalty

David E. Deviney, D.B.A.

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Outstanding Customer Service: The Key to Customer Loyalty

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Virginia Beach, VA 23452

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Introduction

“Sales are down. We’re just not getting repeat business. We have to improve our customer service!”

If you’ve ever worked with customers, you know how vitally important outstanding customer service can be in building customer loyalty. And you probably also know that improving customer service is more complex than most people realize. For example, suppose an organization wants to help its employees improve their telephone customer service skills. The employees attend a course in which they develop their telephone communication. But when they return to work, they find that because of the long delay customers have before they talk with them, the customers are upset and even abusive. What is the problem?

Outstanding customer service means more than developing good communication skills, though these skills are very important. In order for an organization to provide outstanding customer service, it must develop *customer service systems* that support and reinforce *customer service skills*. Customer service systems include hiring, training, rewards, call servicing, repair support, and order processing, to name just a few. The best telephone skills in the world will not be able to completely overcome a faulty call system that requires customers to wait an unreasonable length of time before they talk to someone who can help them.

This book focuses on customer service representatives, the skills they must develop, and the systems within which they must work. Our ongoing theme is the basic philosophy “We care about our customers.” I see this slogan and others like it plastered all over the walls of some organizations—maybe you have too. I’m sure these signs are well-meaning, but they miss the point. Words and advertising will not convince customers that you really care about them—actions and behaviors will. If you care about your customers, show them. As the saying goes, “Customers go where they are wanted and stay where they are appreciated.”

Many of you reading this book may have little *direct control* over the customer service systems you use. You probably do, however, have some *influence* over these systems or at least over the people who work in those areas. To help improve systems, I have included a section on auditing and continuous improvement that will help you evaluate your role in the customer service system. You may even begin to influence others to look at what they are doing too.

About the Author

Dr. David Deviney is the owner of David Deviney & Associates, a consulting firm that serves a variety of industries. As a consultant, Dr. Deviney specializes in customer service, strategic planning, and behavioral change. Having progressed through the ranks, he received his formal education later in his career. He is noted for his skill in applying the theoretical in a practical world.

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All these people made my job a little easier.

Assessing Your Current Customer Service Situation

How to Get the Most from This Book

This book is designed to help you improve your customer service skills and the environment in which these skills are used. To get the most from this book, think about the ways in which you interact with customers. We call these *customer service behaviors* or *actions*. In addition, think of the environment you and your company create for the customer encounter or interaction. It also has an influence on the customer's perception of you and your company. Ask yourself which behaviors you are doing well. Recognize your strengths and continue to develop and improve them. Ask yourself which behaviors need to change. Below is a self-assessment instrument to evaluate your current customer service skills and your customer environment.

Customer Service Self-Assessment

This self-assessment will help you measure your current customer service skills and the customer environment. You are given five choices from which to pick. For each statement, circle the appropriate response that corresponds with how you see yourself and your customer service environment. The five choices are Never (1); Rarely (2); Sometimes (3); Usually (4); and Always (5).

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Always
1. I greet customers with a smile.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Our customer environment is pleasant and friendly.	1	2	3	4	5
3. When dealing with customer problems, I focus on what I can do, not what I cannot do, for them.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I maintain a personal feeling of control with angry customers.	1	2	3	4	5
5. People in other departments are willing to help me with customer issues.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I try to get as much information as possible from the customer before I make suggestions and recommendations.	1	2	3	4	5
7. When customers ask me about one of our products or services, I feel comfortable answering their questions.	1	2	3	4	5

8. When helping a customer solve a problem, I start by asking the customer open-ended questions, such as, "Tell me about the problem you are having."	1	2	3	4	5
9. When communicating with customers, I make frequent eye contact.	1	2	3	4	5
10. When communicating with customers, I give them my undivided attention.	1	2	3	4	5
11. We have an efficient customer service operation that responds to the customer quickly and accurately.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I follow up on customer complaints to make sure the complaint was resolved.	1	2	3	4	5
13. My personal appearance is proper for the customer environment.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I understand that there are different communication preferences, and I use a communication style that is appropriate for the person with whom I am dealing.	1	2	3	4	5
15. When dealing with customers, I summarize and repeat back what they have said to make sure I understand.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I feel confident in my ability to tell a customer "no."	1	2	3	4	5
17. I put a smile in my voice when talking on the phone.	1	2	3	4	5
18. When dealing with upset customers, I maintain a calm appearance.	1	2	3	4	5

Never Rarely Sometimes Usually Always

	1	2	3	4	5
19. I keep a log of what upsets my customers.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I try to make every customer feel special and important.	1	2	3	4	5
21. I control my emotions with customers.	1	2	3	4	5
22. My company conducts a customer service audit at least annually.	1	2	3	4	5
23. I constantly look for ways to improve customer service.	1	2	3	4	5
24. My boss encourages suggestions from me on how to improve customer service.	1	2	3	4	5
25. At the end of customer interactions, I ask customers if there is anything else I can do to help them and sincerely encourage them to return.	1	2	3	4	5

How Did You Score?

If you answered most of the questions as Always or Usually, your perception of your skills and the customer service environment are effectively developed. You are to be commended. However, don't get too "puffed up" at this point. When we rate ourselves, most of us tend to rate ourselves higher than others would rate us. The acid test is how your internal and external customers rate your skills and customer service environment. As you read through the book, identify some ways to make what is already a good customer service approach even better. If you are not constantly improving customer service, keep in mind that your competitor is.

Review areas that you rated Sometimes, Rarely, and Never. These are areas you perceive as weaknesses in your customer service approach. As you read this book, pay particular attention in these areas.

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Chapter One

Building a Strong Foundation

Chapter Objectives

- ▶ Explain the connection between *external customer service* and *internal customer service*.
- ▶ Define the role of the customer service representative.
- ▶ Identify what customers *really* want from you and your company.
- ▶ Recognize the impact of attitude on customer service.

As a consumer, you are able to recognize when you have received good customer service and when you haven't. But as a customer service professional, you might not always be able to recognize when you are providing good customer service and when you aren't. You may sometimes think you are giving good customer service, but the customer may perceive that service as below expectations. One of the primary reasons we don't recognize our own shortcomings in customer service is that we do not realize that customer service is a *system* that must be maintained and improved. To build an effective customer service system, we must understand what influences that system and how those influences affect customer service behaviors.

An outstanding customer service system must be built on sound *customer service principles*.

An outstanding customer service system must be built on sound *customer service principles*. Without these principles in place, a customer service system cannot reach the level to which most organizations aspire. While this entire book explores customer service principles, you will encounter some of the more basic principles in this chapter.

Who Are Customers?

We will start by defining a very basic term—*customers*. Customers are people who have a specific need or desire that they believe can be satisfied by your product or service. Customers can be either *internal* or *external*. We most often associate the word *customer* with external customers. External customers in both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations are people outside the organization who benefit from that organization's product or service.

Internal customers differ from external customers because they do not necessarily derive direct benefit from the organization's products or services. Internal customers are people within the company who receive your personal work output. For example, a salesperson takes an order from the external customer and sends it to warehousing to be processed. The warehouse person receiving the order is the internal customer of the salesperson. Accounting and purchasing could also be internal customers. Following this scenario, we can see that a customer service problem between internal customers can have a dramatic impact on external customer service. *You cannot provide outstanding external customer service until you provide outstanding internal customer service.*

This book will focus mostly on external customers. However, most, if not all, of the principles discussed apply directly to internal customer relations.

Customers are people who have a specific need or desire that they believe can be satisfied by your product or service.



Take a Moment

Consider your customers, both external and internal.

External Customers

How would you describe your external customers (rich, poor, old, young, etc.)?

What do they expect from you?

What have been some of their recent complaints?

When customers come to you with complaints, are you able to work with them so that they leave feeling good about your organization?

What could you do differently to help complaining customers feel good about your organization?



Take a Moment *(continued)*

Internal Customers

List the departments or groups that receive your work output (internal customers).

What do they expect from you?

What have been some of their recent complaints?

What was your attitude toward the complaints (negative, viewed as opportunity to improve, neutral, etc.)?

Were the complaints resolved so that both the internal customer and your organization won?

What would you do differently to improve internal customer relations?

Who Are Customer Service Representatives?

We have been using the term *customer service representatives*, but who are they? When we hear the term customer service representative, we generally think of employees with that title or one similar. While it is true that they have more contact with the customer than most employees, all employees within an organization have some impact on customer service. For example, a shipping clerk impacts customers by filling orders promptly, and an accountant impacts customers by preparing invoices accurately.

For some employees, contact with a customer may be casual, yet it is still important. Consider the customer waiting in a company's lobby. An employee walks by but fails to speak to the customer. That employee has probably just sent a negative message, especially if the employee's body language makes him or her appear hurried or irritated. At a minimum, that employee has passed up an opportunity to make a positive impression on this customer.

As you can see from these examples, while some employees have a great deal of interaction with customers, everyone has a responsibility for projecting a "we care" attitude. Remember, all employees project one of three attitudes to the customer: negative, neutral, or positive. None of us want to project a negative attitude, and we generally get feedback when we do exhibit this attitude. Projecting a neutral attitude can be as damaging to customer relationships as projecting a negative attitude. In today's highly competitive world, we must adapt, develop, and project a positive attitude toward customers. Customers must walk away thinking, "They really do care about me." Organizations must develop, reinforce, and reward behaviors that reflect positive customer service attitudes.

Take a Moment

What are some things employees do that reflect a negative attitude toward customers? a neutral attitude? a positive attitude? List them below.



Why Is Customer Satisfaction Important?

Almost everyone agrees that customer satisfaction is important, but why? Why is it important to you, and why is it important to your organization?

Take a Moment

Why is customer satisfaction important to your organization?

Why is customer satisfaction important to you?



The fundamental reason customer satisfaction is important to your organization is because it allows your organization to stay in business. In many businesses, service is the only thing that makes your organization more attractive than your competitors’.

● Building a Strong Foundation

Customer satisfaction is also important to you on a personal level. Using your customer service skills to satisfy your customers will lower your stress level and help you avoid job burnout. For example, calming an irritated customer allows you to focus your energy on solving the problem rather than arguing or dealing with your own frayed emotions.

You can derive a sense of satisfaction when you solve a customer's problem. Most customers appreciate your help and will tell you so. No matter whether you are selling to a happy customer or dealing with a dissatisfied customer, you have the opportunity to help solve a problem.



Take a Moment

Think of all the reasons customers choose *not* to buy or *stop* buying a product or service from your organization. In your opinion, what are the top five reasons? List them in order of importance with the most important first:

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

Compare the list you created in the previous exercise to the following provided by the American Society for Quality:

- ◆ 67% of customers leave because of an attitude of indifference on the part of a company employee.
- ◆ 14% of customers leave because of dissatisfaction with the product.
- ◆ 10% of customers leave for other reasons (move, death, etc.).
- ◆ 9% of customers leave because of competitors.

Was your list similar and in the same order of importance?
Where should you focus your attention?

What Do Customers Really Want from You?

When customers decide to buy and use your product or service, they make that decision based on their perception of how that product or service will meet their expectations. This is Perceived Value (PV). There are three components of perceived value—*Quality*, *Customer Service*, and *Cost*. The relationship of these three components can be expressed in an algebraic formula:

$$\text{Perceived Value} = \text{Quality} + \text{Customer Service} - \text{Cost}$$

There are three components of perceived value—*Quality*, *Customer Service*, and *Cost*.

You may produce a product, such as parts, paint, food, cars, lawn mowers, lipstick, or paper. Or you may provide a service, such as plumbing, accounting, house painting, computer repair, consulting, or nursing. Whether you produce a product or service, your output has characteristics and features that the customer desires or needs. These characteristics and features define the *quality component*. The *customer service component* of the PV formula is defined as any helpful act performed for the customer that enhances the quality of the product or service. Toll-free numbers, customer calling centers, knowledgeable sales representatives, volume discounting, and customer follow-up are just a few examples of customer service.

According to the Perceived Value concept, if our customers perceive our quality and customer service higher and our price lower than our competitors', chances are they will buy from us. Remember, we are talking about the customer's definition of quality, service, and cost, not our own. Each customer can have a different definition of each of these components and may focus on one more than another. For example, a person with an income of \$75,000 may place less emphasis on cost and more on the other components of quality and customer service than a person with an income of \$35,000. The person with the higher income might shop at a full-service clothing store, while the person with the lower income might prefer a discount clothing store.

● Building a Strong Foundation

As we mentioned earlier, according to a national survey, 67 percent of customers leave because of poor customer service. Compare this to the 14 percent who leave because of problems with the product or service. As a rule, PV is influenced more by customer service than quality or cost.

What Is Your Role as a Customer Service Representative?

- Bill's high school was having a Career Week, and Bill was interviewing his neighbor, Mary, about her job. "I know you're a customer service representative for your company," he began, "but what exactly do you do?"

"I do a lot of things," Mary responded, "but mostly I just make sure the customer is happy."

Is this an adequate description of Mary's responsibilities? Often, when customer service representatives are asked this question, they give a similar response. Sometimes they also talk about the technical aspects of their jobs, such as completing the work orders for customer calls.

Take a Moment

List your responsibilities as a customer service representative. Be specific. For example, “Greet customers” is too general. “Greet customers within one minute of their entering the store” is specific. List your top 10 responsibilities.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____



As a customer service representative, your job is to influence, as much as possible, all three components of the customer's Perceived Value. While you generally have more *control* over the service component of the customer's PV than quality and cost, you can still influence the customer's *perception* of quality and cost by emphasizing the benefits of your product or service and the reasonableness of its price. You begin this process the minute a customer walks into your business, calls you on the phone, or sends you an e-mail message.

● Building a Strong Foundation

Other responsibilities of the customer service representative include:

- ◆ Creating a positive first impression of the product or service.
- ◆ Taking ownership of customer problems until they are solved.
- ◆ Building positive customer encounters.
- ◆ Looking for ways to improve customer service systems.
- ◆ Knowing your products and services.
- ◆ Trying to understand the customer's needs before making recommendations or solving problems.
- ◆ Leaving the customer wanting to buy your products or services again.
- ◆ Managing your own stress level.
- ◆ Doing what you say you will do when you said you would do it.
- ◆ Enjoying the challenge of being a customer service representative.

You may not have reached all of these goals yet. Throughout this book we will explore actions and behaviors that will help you meet these responsibilities.

Maintaining a Positive Attitude

Managing Your Attitude

■ “I really am looking forward to the weekend,” Brittain said to her coworker Yoshi as they started work Friday morning. “I’m getting to the point where I hate to come to work. All I do is deal with abusive customers. All they want to do is complain.”

“You work right beside me all week doing the same job as mine,” Brittain continued. “Yet, you’re always upbeat and patient with customers. How do you do it?”

“Well, I don’t look at customer problems as complaining,” Yoshi answered. “I try to put myself in their situation and ask

myself how I would feel. That makes me more positive. When a customer is really abusive, I tell myself that everyone has a bad day. In general, I just try to keep my thoughts as positive as possible.”

Good customer service starts with a positive attitude—*your* positive attitude. An *attitude* is a person’s feelings toward a given set of circumstances. These feelings may be *positive* or *negative*.

Both you and your customers begin each customer encounter with an attitude. These attitudes will affect the actions and behaviors each of you exhibit. You have little control over the customer’s attitude. You can, however, control your attitude. How can we describe a positive customer service attitude?

A positive customer service attitude begins when you come to work expecting to have a good day. Since part of your attitude is made up of your expectations for yourself, the way you approach your day affects how you act and behave. For example, if your attitude in the morning is “I dread going to work and dealing with another irate customer,” chances are you will look for that irate customer throughout the day. This may cause you to misread a customer’s “irate level” and overreact.

A positive customer service attitude begins when you come to work expecting to have a good day.

We all have days when we fall into the habit of negative thinking. But the important thing to remember is that you can take control of your attitude and turn a negative day into a positive one. The following phrases can help you get back on the positive track:

- “I can help this customer solve a problem.”
- “I can find something good in every situation if I look for it.”
- “I have control over my life and this situation.”
- “I am a good person; therefore, the customer is not angry at me.”

● Building a Strong Foundation

People with a positive attitude use “I can” and “I will” when talking to themselves and to their customers. Statements that include “I can” and “I will” are empowering and help free the creative side of the brain. This can help you develop creative solutions to problems and lower your stress levels. Thoughts of “I can’t” and “I don’t” are disempowering and give you permission to stifle your creativity. With this in mind, *talk about what you can do for the customer, not what you can’t do.*



Take a Moment

We have just seen some phrases that can help you turn a negative attitude into a positive one. Can you think of others? Write them below.

Overcoming Biases

- Roger looked at the next person in line at his bank teller window and shook his head. “Another high school student with her first checking account,” he said to himself. “They’re always overdrawn, but they can never admit it’s their fault. I hate dealing with these kids!”

Our attitudes toward other people affect our willingness to accept and deal with those people.

Our attitudes toward other people affect our willingness to accept and deal with those people. If our assumptions are positive, our willingness and commitment increase, but if our assumptions are negative, the reverse happens.

Over the years, you may have developed biases that lead you to have a negative attitude toward certain customers. You may find yourself reacting negatively toward customers because of their age, the way they are dressed, their ability to speak English, or their ethnic background. To provide outstanding customer service, we must be willing to question our biases and challenge the assumptions upon which they are based. This may not always be comfortable, but you can change your attitude by practicing positive thinking. All customers deserve respect.

Take a Moment

Are your biases keeping you from providing outstanding customer service to all your customers?



Influencing Your Customer's Attitude

As we said before, the only attitude you can control is your own. You cannot change a customer's attitude; however, you can influence it. One of the best ways to influence other people's attitude is by listening to what they have to say and asking questions to be sure you've understood their meaning. As Michele Matt Yanna states in her book *Attitude: The Choice Is Yours*, "The only way to better understand someone and validate your perceptions is to learn more about the situation." Most people want understanding first, and then a solution to their problem. Once you understand their concerns, you can move to problem solving.

Take a Moment

Make a list of the things you have been thinking about doing to improve internal and external customer service. We will call this your *Should List*. Place an "x" by those that are important. Now write an action statement for each important *should* listed.

Example:

Should List	Important	Action List
I should smile more.	X	I will smile each time I greet a customer today.

Should List	Important	Action List
1. _____	_____	_____
2. _____	_____	_____
3. _____	_____	_____
4. _____	_____	_____
5. _____	_____	_____



Now that you have converted your should list to an action list, make a copy of it and post it at your desk or workstation. Look at it several times a day for 10 consecutive days.

Developing Customer Service Standards

Customers see your positive attitude reflected in your *behaviors*. A *behavior* is something other people can see you do. It is action oriented. Often, we talk about customer service in terms of attitude, believing that everyone knows the expected behaviors. However, people can, and often do, have different interpretations of attitudinal terms, such as “friendly.” For example, employees might be directed to provide customers with a friendly environment. “Friendly” is an attitudinal concept. What behaviors should employees adopt to convey that friendliness? “Greeting the customer with a smile” describes a specific behavior that can help create a friendly environment.

Every organization should have a customer service standard that specifically describes desired customer service behaviors.

As the above example illustrates, every organization should have a customer service standard that specifically describes desired customer service behaviors. In fact, every organization has a standard for customer service, whether it is defined or not. We usually call these undefined, unwritten standards “the way we do things around here.” Unwritten standards are generally inconsistent and difficult to pass on to new customer service representatives. A clearly written standard can help new and experienced employees identify acceptable customer service behavior in a variety of situations.

If your company does not have a customer service standard, you should develop your own. In defining clear, specific behavioral expectations, you will set a goal for your own level of performance. It becomes a tool to measure your own improvement.

Whether you develop a standard only for yourself or for your entire department or organization, you should include descriptions of behaviors related to:

- ◆ Personal appearance
 - Example: My uniforms will be neat and unsoiled.
- ◆ Work area appearance
 - Example: I will keep my work area free of trash, and my desk will be uncluttered.
- ◆ Personal attitude
 - Example: I will look for ways to help each customer.
- ◆ Listening
 - Example: I will not allow interruptions when talking with my customers.
- ◆ Telephone communication
 - Example: When I answer the phone, I will always speak with a pleasant tone of voice.
- ◆ Face-to-face communication
 - Example: I will repeat back to customers what I have heard them say to make sure I have understood them.
- ◆ Internal customer teamwork
 - Example: When another department has a problem and they ask for help, I will exceed their expectations when helping.
- ◆ Problem solving
 - Example: When I find a problem, I will fix it or document it to be fixed later.
- ◆ Product/Service knowledge
 - Example: I will read one product user's manual a week until I have learned everything about our products.
- ◆ Customer response time
 - Example: I will greet customers within 30 seconds of their arrival at the front counter.

● Building a Strong Foundation

- ◆ Customer knowledge
 - Example: When dealing with customers, I will ask them how they use our product or services.
- ◆ Customer hand-offs
 - Example: When I hand customers off, I will make sure I get them to the right person every time.
- ◆ Customer follow-up
 - Example: After every repair job, I will call to make sure that everything met customer expectations.
- ◆ Customer attention and comfort
 - Example: When customers are having to wait for service, I will make sure that they have coffee or juice to drink.

Building Your Product or Service Knowledge

Can you answer basic questions about your organization's products and services? Most customers expect you to have some knowledge of the products and/or services you provide. The old saying "knowledge is power" is true. Remember the customer's Perceived Value and its components of quality, service, and cost. Knowledge of your products and services allows you to discuss the various characteristics that set you apart from the competition. In other words, you have an opportunity to increase PV. Little or no knowledge of your products and services has the opposite affect.

Features are the components of the product or service itself. **Benefits** are the way a product's or service's features can benefit the customer.

What Are the Features and Benefits?

An effective way to present your products or services to your customers is in terms of their *features* and *benefits*. *Features* are the components of the product or service itself. For example, a car might offer such features as leather upholstery, four-wheel drive, cruise control, and air conditioning. *Benefits* are the way a product's or service's features can benefit the customer. For example, a car with four-wheel drive offers the benefit of allowing the driver to handle difficult road conditions.

When you describe a product or service to a customer, you may be tempted to stop with a list of features, as in this example:

- These running shoes have a new patented insole system. The treads on the outer sole are designed to provide extra traction and the upper part of the shoe is waterproof and stain resistant.

The features in the example are certainly impressive. But remember, customers come to you because they are trying to fulfill a need or desire. They are interested in how a product or service's features can help them meet that need or desire—how those features will *benefit* them. When you talk about features in terms of the benefits they provide, you show customers how your product or service can meet their needs, as in this example:

- You mentioned that you'd been having some foot problems lately. These shoes have a new type of insole that can reduce the impact that causes that type of problem.

Take a Moment

If a customer were to ask you what the important features of your product or service are, what would you tell them? Pick a specific product or service your organization provides and list as many important features as you can.

Now list the benefits these features could provide a customer.



Know Your Competitors

Besides being familiar with your own products and services, you should also have a working knowledge of the products and services of your competitors. Such knowledge will allow you to emphasize the differences between their offerings and yours. A wise consumer has probably shopped around and knows the competitors' advantages. Can you explain your advantages?

Chapter Summary

Everyone within a company has responsibilities as a customer service representative. Some have more contact with customers than others, but all employees influence the customer's Perceived Value (PV).

As a customer service representative, you have both internal and external customers. Sometimes customer service representatives do not recognize the importance of internal customer service. However, if you are to have outstanding external customer service, you must have outstanding internal customer service. The two are inseparable.

Your attitude and actions must leave the customer with the impression that "they really care about me."

Your attitude and actions must leave the customer with the impression that "they really care about me." Your *attitude* is the feeling you have toward a given set of circumstances. Approaching the customer with an "I can" attitude rather than "I can't" attitude is the first step to building lasting relationships with your customers. While customer service standards and knowledge about your product or service are very important, they are useless without a positive, caring attitude.

Your attitude is shown by your behaviors toward customers. *Behaviors* are actions that other people can see you do. You should maintain a set of standards to guide your customer service behaviors in various situations. Being knowledgeable about your product is a behavior that can help you build perceived value for your customer. Become familiar with the features of your products and services and be able to discuss how these features can benefit your customers. Also be prepared to describe the advantages your products and services offer when compared to your competition.

Self-Check: Chapter One Review



Answers to these questions appear on page 100.

1. Who is the external customer?

2. Who is the internal customer?

3. True or False?

You can have great external customer service without great internal customer service.

4. What is Perceived Value (PV)? Explain each component.

5. Define the term *attitude*. Why is a positive attitude important for providing outstanding customer service?

6. Why are customer service standards important?

7. True or False?

If a customer asks you about your company's products or services, you should be able to describe them in some detail.

Chapter *Two*

Communicating Effectively with Customers

Chapter Objectives

- ▶ Develop skills in listening.
- ▶ Determine each customer's communication preferences.
- ▶ Polish communication skills.
- ▶ Understand why words do not communicate very much of your message.
- ▶ Improve telephone skills.

“I told you I wouldn't be home on Friday morning, but your people came to connect my electricity anyway! The gate was locked, and they couldn't get in to make the electrical connection. Now you tell me it will be Monday before you can get to me. Don't you people communicate here?”

In business, no skill is more important than the ability to effectively communicate. It is especially vital in customer service, where communication can make or break customer relationships.

Communication can make or break customer relationships.

Communication may appear to be a simple process, but in reality it is highly complex. Within this process, two or more people attempt to arrive at shared meaning and understanding. Communication involves at least one sender (the one trying to transmit a message) and one receiver (the one trying to understand the message).

In order to achieve shared understanding, both senders and receivers in the communication process must engage in both talking and listening. One of the biggest hurdles to effective communication is that many people believe that

communication only involves talking. As the saying goes, we have two ears and one mouth for a reason—we should listen twice as much as we talk. This is especially true in customer service. Your primary goal in customer service communication is to understand the customer. This requires a skill we call *active listening*.

Developing Active Listening Skills

You may think you're a good listener, but are you really? Most people with typical listening skills retain only about 10 percent of what they hear. Active listening can improve your retention rate.

When you engage in active listening, you actively work to understand what the other party is trying to convey. You take responsibility for understanding the message. The following skills will help you move from being an ineffective, passive listener to being an active listener.

Avoiding Distractions

The first step to active listening is to focus your attention on the speaker. This may sound easy, but your environment is filled with distractions that can pull you away from the customer. You can also create your own distractions if you try to do too many things at once instead of giving the customer your full attention. Here are a few common distractions that can serve as barriers to active listening. As you read over the list, check those you have experienced in your own customer encounters.

- Carrying on a customer conversation in a noisy area.
- Taking a phone call when you are dealing with a customer.
- Allowing others to interrupt when you are dealing with a customer.
- Trying to carry on two conversations at once.
- Trying to do unrelated paperwork when dealing with a customer.
- Checking hair, makeup, or clothing while dealing with a customer.

When you engage in active listening, you actively work to understand what the other party is trying to convey.

● Communicating Effectively with Customers

- ❑ Thinking about something else when listening to a customer.
- ❑ Planning your response to the customer while the customer is still talking.
- ❑ Failing to paraphrase back to the customer what you are hearing.
- ❑ Hurrying the conversation or interrupting the customer.

Making Eye Contact

Maintaining eye contact lets the customer know you are listening and want to help. Lack of eye contact can create an environment of distrust. How many times have you heard people say, “I don’t trust her. She wouldn’t look me in the eye.”

Confirming

Confirming statements are short comments that let customers know you are interested and understand what they are talking about. They include:

- ◆ “I see,” “Okay,” “Uh-huh.”
- ◆ “Tell me more.”
- ◆ “That must have really upset you.”

Questioning

If the customer says something you don’t understand, you are responsible for asking questions to clarify meaning. Questioning not only helps you understand what the customer is saying but also conveys your interest to the customer, which will help the customer feel appreciated.

If the customer says something you don’t understand, you are responsible for asking questions to clarify meaning.

Reflecting

Reflecting statements summarize or paraphrase your understanding of what the customer is saying. Reflecting statements should also reflect the customer's emotions and feelings whenever possible. For example:

Customer:

"The car I just bought from you is using excessive gas and running rough at stop signs. When I start to accelerate, it stalls and then jumps. I've almost gotten hit twice as a result!"

Your reflecting statement:

"Your car is not accelerating properly, and it's using more gas than it should. You're afraid it's going to cause an accident."

Most customer conversations of any length should have several reflecting statements. A final reflecting statement should be used at the end of a conversation. This ensures that you understand what the other person is trying to communicate. Remember, it's okay to take notes during the conversation.

Most customer conversations of any length should have several reflecting statements.

Take a Moment

Imagine you're in a conversation with a customer. Write a reflecting statement for the following statement made by the customer. Remember, you are looking for the message and the feelings behind it.

Customer:

"When I bought the dress, I was told by your salesperson that the alterations would be completed by today. I'm in a wedding tomorrow and I need the dress. I have shopped here for over five years, and nothing like this has ever happened. I don't know what I'm going to do now!"

Your reflecting statement:



● Communicating Effectively with Customers

As important as active listening is, you will also need to develop your skills as a speaker in order to interact effectively with customers. The following tips will help you communicate positively with your customers.

Speaking in the Positive: Words and Tone of Voice

When speaking to a customer, your primary goal is to remain positive. Don't waste time telling the customer what you *can't* do; focus on what you *can* do. Put yourself in the customer's shoes. Wouldn't you rather hear, "I'll be happy to look that up for you," than "I don't know."

The following table shows some negative phrases to avoid and some positive phrases you can use instead:

Negative Phrase	Positive Phrase
I don't know	I'll find out
That's not my job.	I'll find someone who can help you with that.
That's not my fault.	I'll get that taken care of right away.
I'm busy right now.	I'll be with you in just a minute.
Why don't you give me a call back in a few minutes.	May I call you back?
Why did you...? (implying blame)	Let me see if I understand...
We can't do that.	We can do this.

Take a Moment

Can you think of some negative phrases that you frequently use when dealing with customers? What are some positive phrases you could use instead?

Negative	Positive
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____



Though the words you use are important, the way you say them may be more important still. When you speak, only about 7 percent of the message you send is communicated by the words being used. Fifty-five percent of the message is conveyed by your tone of voice. For example, think about the statement “Good morning.” If you are *really* having a good morning, your voice will be filled with enthusiasm. But if you are tired or upset, your voice will reflect that as well. Have you ever had someone else say “Good morning” to you and a friend and then immediately ask your friend, “I wonder what’s wrong with her?”

Fifty-five percent of the message is conveyed by your tone of voice.

Your tone tells the customer a lot about your energy level, interest, disposition, attitude, and enthusiasm at that instant. For example, suppose you have just interacted with a difficult customer and are still feeling some frustration from that interaction. Unless you let go of that frustration immediately, it could be reflected in your tone of voice when you interact with your next customer. The hostile tone could put that customer on the defensive, even if the words you speak are friendly.

Body Language: Yours and Theirs

We’ve seen that the words we speak convey 7 percent of our meaning and our tone of voice conveys 55 percent of our meaning. The remaining 38 percent is conveyed by our body language. Body language can include our posture, gestures, facial expressions, and the way we dress and groom ourselves. How important is body language? Research suggests that when

● Communicating Effectively with Customers

When our words and body language contradict each other, listeners will believe what the body is saying rather than our words.

our words and body language contradict each other, listeners will believe what the body is saying rather than our words.

You can use body language to support the positive message you want to send to your customers. Here are a few tips to enhance your communication:

- ◆ Smile often at customers, especially when you first meet them.
- ◆ Keep a professional personal appearance.
- ◆ Maintain eye contact with your customers when talking to them. (It's okay to glance away occasionally.)
- ◆ Keep a professional, but relaxed posture. Don't slouch.
- ◆ When appropriate, take notes of what the customer is saying.
- ◆ Move occasionally. For example, leaning forward conveys interest.
- ◆ Until welcomed in, don't violate a person's personal zone. This is usually a circle about an arm's length around the person.



Take a Moment

How many of the body language tips just given do you currently follow? Where could you improve? List three tips that you will work on during the next week.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Sending a Message Through Physical Surroundings

Research suggests that physical surroundings can influence a customer's reactions to perceived failures in customer service. For example, if a customer comes to you with a complaint and your work area is messy or disorganized, its appearance may intensify the negative feelings the customer is having. On the other hand, if you maintain a pleasant appearance in your work area, it can have a positive impact on how customers react when things don't go according to their expectations. This same logic applies to your personal appearance. A neat, well-groomed, professional appearance will help your customers feel more positive about their encounters with you.

Physical surroundings can influence a customer's reactions to perceived failures in customer service.

2

Take a Moment

Close your eyes and visualize your work area. What first impressions do people get when they enter it?

Positive Impressions

Negative Impressions

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____



Improving Your Telephone Communication

In some organizations, such as mail-order companies, customer service representatives may never see their customers face to face. Telephones fill the void when customers cannot come to our place of business. Because you are not dealing face to face with customers when you speak to them by phone, you lose an important part of the communication link—body language. When you interact by phone, you must rely on other aspects of communication to make up for the lack of body language.

One way you can make up for a lack of face-to-face contact with your customers is by dealing with their calls promptly. Put yourself in the customer's shoes. What goes through your mind

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When you answer the phone, try consciously smiling before you speak.

when you call an organization and the phone rings over and over without an answer, or, worse yet, you constantly get a busy signal? Many customers find such situations extremely frustrating. Someone, even an answering machine, should answer the phone by the fourth ring.

When you answer the phone, try consciously smiling before you speak. Think of the caller as being right in front of you. This only takes a few seconds and will literally put you in a better frame of mind to respond to the caller. Try putting a mirror on your desk or counter and smile into it before you answer the phone. Glance at it several times during your conversation with the customer. What message is your facial expression conveying in your words and tone of voice?

Your greeting should be friendly and professional and include your name and the company name. For example, you might say, “Thank you for calling Paige Aluminum Products. This is Alyssa Jones. How may I help you?” Speak clearly and directly into the receiver. Don’t hold the receiver under your chin. Since phone connections are never perfect, the volume of your voice should be slightly louder than your normal face-to-face speaking volume.

Letting callers know what is happening gives them a sense of having some control.

Always give your callers your undivided attention. Get a name early in the conversation and use it often. It is a good policy to make notes when you are talking, starting with the customer’s name. If you put the caller on hold (e.g., to get information), tell the person what you are doing. For example, you might say, “Mr. Lowe, I don’t have the information you requested at my desk, but it will only take me about a minute to get it. If that is inconvenient, I can call you back.” Letting callers know what is happening gives them a sense of having some control. If you take longer to get the information than you expected, return to the phone and let the caller know.

Like all customer service principles and practices, telephone principles and practices apply to the internal customer also. *Remember, you will never provide outstanding external customer service until you provide outstanding internal customer service.*

Take a Moment

When you call a business on the phone, what are some of the things they do that irritate you? List them below.

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

Now ask yourself how you can avoid doing these things to your own customers.



As you work to develop your communication skills, you may notice that some of your customers communicate very differently than you do. Some may want to spend time chatting before dealing with the situation that brought them to you; others want to get right down to business. In the next section, we'll consider how you can adapt your communication skills to these very different communication styles.

Understanding Your Customer's Communication Style

■ "Mr. Able, please tell me how the accident happened."

"Well, Mr. Johnson, it all started that morning. I'd had a touch of the flu, so I decided to go to the doctor. My wife couldn't take me, so I had to drive my pickup. The pickup is hard to start and doesn't have power steering. Well anyway, I left at about 10 that morning for my doctor's appointment, which was at noon. Since it's only a 10-minute drive to the doctor's office, I decided to pick up my friend Jim and have a cup of coffee before my appointment. But when I got to Jim's house, he wasn't home, so I decided to go have coffee by myself."

"Mr. Able, excuse me for interrupting, but didn't the accident happen *after* your doctor's appointment?"

● Communicating Effectively with Customers

Most people would agree that Mr. Able likes to talk. This is his communication style. But Mr. Johnson, the insurance agent, needs the specific facts of the accident in order to complete his paperwork and doesn't appreciate Mr. Able's chit chat. Mr. Johnson's communication style is very different from Mr. Able's. Do you think they could get frustrated with each other during this conversation?

Everyone has certain preferences about how she or he wants to communicate.

The key to effective communication is to understand that everyone has certain preferences about how she or he wants to communicate. Each of us have certain informational needs. Some of us use the information we receive to make quick decisions, while others take more time. Some want a lot of information, some don't. Some want to socialize, some want to get to the point quickly. Some freely provide information, others require prompting.

We can group people's communication preferences into four basic communication styles:

- ◆ The "don't waste my time" style
- ◆ The "let's get acquainted" style
- ◆ The "let's take our time and work together" style
- ◆ The "let's study this situation" style

As you read the following descriptions, try to determine which is your preferred style for communicating.

The "don't waste my time" style is direct, competitive, forceful, decisive, and strong willed.

Don't Waste My Time

People who communicate with this style are direct, competitive, forceful, decisive, and strong willed. They don't want you to waste their time by being incompetent or ineffective.

When dealing with this type of style, your approach should be direct and to the point. Don't talk about the weather or engage in too much small talk. Too much information can make "don't waste my time" people frustrated and upset. Cover the high points when giving them information. If they want more details, they'll ask for them.

If “don’t waste my time” people become unhappy or frustrated, they can become obstinate, inflexible, uncompromising, autocratic, and arrogant. They will generally let you know when they are upset. They will pressure you to get what they want. You must give them time to get their point across and you must let them know you are listening to what they are saying. These people are competitive, so let them win when you can.

Let’s Get Acquainted

People who prefer this communication style want you to engage them personally. They want to feel welcomed into a warm and friendly place. They tend to be sociable and enthusiastic and animated in their conversations.

When communicating with “let’s get acquainted” people, you should also be warm and friendly. Since they like the sense of touch, shake their hand or pat them on the back. Ask them how they feel about different things. Talk about what’s important to them.

Since “let’s get acquainted” people like to talk, you will have to provide them some “air” time. They want you to be engaging as well, so don’t be blunt, brief, or closemouthed. These people will also become bored with too much data, such as facts or figures. They want to talk about the “feeling” aspects of your product or service.

When upset or frustrated, “let’s get acquainted” people become chatty, talking about trivial things. They may appear shallow, complacent, unwilling to listen, and even egotistical. To help them get beyond their emotions, you will have to demonstrate empathy and understanding about how they feel. You must show them that you genuinely care about them as people.

Let’s Take Our Time and Work Together

People who prefer this style of communication are patient, persistent, analytical, rational, dependable, faithful, easygoing, humble, and unassuming. They like to work with people who genuinely care about what is happening. They prefer a low-pressure environment in which people work together as a harmonious team. These people value their personal space and usually do not like too much touching.

The “let’s get acquainted” style is sociable and enthusiastic.

The “let’s work together” style is patient, persistent, analytical, and dependable.

● Communicating Effectively with Customers

When communicating with “let’s work together” people, you should begin by engaging them in conversation. While they do not like a lot of “small talk,” they need to know that you care about them and their needs. Some get-acquainted conversation is useful. Move slowly and be patient. Abruptly rushing into business can frustrate and upset them. They will also become frustrated if you talk too much or attempt to manipulate them. They need time to make decisions—especially major ones—and do not like to be pushed. Allow them to ask questions, and don’t be afraid to probe for understanding.

When upset, “let’s work together” people will become detached and withdraw. Sometimes they will become nonresponsive or indifferent. When really upset, they can become inflexible, rigid, and headstrong. When dealing with their displeasure, be patient and take your time. Show interest in the person and look for common ground. They generally are willing to work out a rational and logical solution.

Let’s Study This Situation

The “let’s study this” style is logical, exacting, demanding, careful, and obedient.

People who prefer this style tend to be logical, methodical, exacting, conservative, fussy, demanding, careful, tactful, and obedient. They tend to be perfectionists, expecting excellence and setting high standards for themselves and others. They prefer hearing the facts and like a lot of information. They want you to stick to the business at hand. Since they expect excellence, make sure your information is accurate and down to earth. Listen very carefully to what they are saying. Take notes. Ask questions to make sure you understand them.

Since “let’s study this” people like to stick to business, you should avoid being fickle, frivolous, chatty, or informal. Be organized in your communication and presentations. Stick to the facts. Allow them time to make decisions, especially major decisions. They tend to have a low tolerance for risk.

When “let’s study this” people become upset or frustrated, they can become very rigid, headstrong, difficult to please, and suspicious. When this happens, you should stick to the facts, be patient and friendly, and avoid comments that could be taken personally.

Adapting to the Styles

The goal of communication is to transfer understanding between two or more people. If this is true, then the key to good understanding is adapting your style of communication to the other person's style. People tend to respond best to those whose communication style is similar to theirs. Most customers will send you clues on how they want to communicate. For example, one person may start the conversation by smiling and talking about the high school football game. Another may not smile at all and get right down to business. Your job is to learn the signals and adapt your communication style to theirs.

The key to good understanding is adapting your style of communication to the other person's style.

2

Take a Moment

In the space below, write the style of communication you use most often. Next think of a person with whom you get along exceptionally well. How would you characterize that person's communication style? Write it down. Next think of the person with whom you have the greatest difficulty communicating and write down that person's communication style.

My communication style is _____.

_____ is a person with whom I get along exceptionally well. His/her communication style is

_____.

_____ is a person with whom I have difficulty dealing. His/her communication style is

_____.



Now let's take a look at what you wrote in the previous exercise. There is a good chance that the person with whom you get along best has a communication style similar to yours. While this is not always the case, we tend to get along best with those whose communication preference is similar to our own. Now

● Communicating Effectively with Customers

review the communication preference of the person with whom you have difficulty dealing. There is a good chance that person's communication style is almost the opposite of yours.

When you are dealing with a customer whose communication style is similar to your own, you may feel as though you "connect" with that person. When dealing with a customer whose communication style is different from yours, you may have difficulty. The key to working successfully with all types of communication styles is first to recognize the customer's communication style and then to adapt your style to the customer's. If the customer needs a lot of time or information, provide it. If they don't, then don't. In communication, one style does not fit all.



Take a Moment

Let's return to the "difficult" person you identified in the previous exercise. How can you adapt your communication style to that person's?

Chapter Summary

Most of us probably assume that we are good communicators. But in reality, we retain only about 10 percent of what we hear. Improving your listening skills is the first step in providing outstanding customer service. You can develop *active listening* skills by taking the following steps when a customer is speaking:

- ◆ Avoiding distractions
- ◆ Making eye contact
- ◆ Confirming
- ◆ Questioning
- ◆ Reflecting

A second important customer service skill is to be sure that you use *positive* words when speaking to a customer. Don't tell customers what you can't do for them ("I don't know how to do that"). Instead, tell them what you can do ("I'll find someone who can help you with that").

Communication involves more than just the words you use. It involves your tone of voice and body language. Your personal appearance and the appearance of our surroundings also send a message—whether it's the message you intend or not. What messages are you are sending to your customers?

Only 7 percent of the message we communicate is conveyed by the words we use. Fifty-five percent is conveyed by tone of voice and 38 percent by body language. When you speak with a customer on the phone, you lack the ability to communicate through body language. You can compensate for the lack of face-to-face contact by handling all customer calls promptly and putting a smile in your voice when you speak over the phone.

Everyone has a communication style. We tend to communicate better with those who have similar communication styles. Therefore, you must understand the customer's style and your own and be willing to adapt your style to theirs. Doing this will dramatically increase understanding and improve customer relationships.

Communication involves more than just the words you use. It involves your tone of voice and body language.

● Communicating Effectively with Customers

The key to good communication, whether over the phone or in person, is to focus your attention on the customer. If they perceive they are being “cared for,” then your communication skills are sending the right message.

Self-Check: Chapter Two Review

Answers to these questions appear on page 101.



1. What is the goal of communication?

2. When communicating, what is reflecting?

3. True or False?

Our body language has nothing to do with how the message we are sending is interpreted.

4. Tone of voice accounts for _____ percent of the meaning of a message.

5. Why is it more difficult to communicate over the phone than face to face?

6. True or False?

I can always use the same communication approach with every customer.

Chapter *Three*

Managing the Customer Encounter

Chapter Objectives

- ▶ Show customers that you value their business.
- ▶ Understand and influence customer behavior
- ▶ Ask questions that will help you help the customer.
- ▶ Hand off customers without making them feel ignored.
- ▶ Follow five steps for successfully solving customer problems.
- ▶ Say “no” to customers without losing future business.
- ▶ Successfully close the customer encounter.
- ▶ Provide appropriate customer follow-up.

Whenever you or another member of your organization interacts with a customer, you are engaged in a *customer encounter*. Customer encounters include situations in which:

- ◆ A new customer makes a buying decision.
- ◆ A repeat customer brings you return business.
- ◆ A customer with a problem comes to you for a solution.

The customer encounter is the most critical step in the customer service system. A successful customer encounter goes beyond the initial decision to buy your product or service. Customers leave a successful customer service encounter with the feeling that they have received outstanding customer service.

Unfortunately, most customers walk away from a customer encounter with the feeling that the service was either “nothing to write home about” or poor. And customers who leave without receiving outstanding customer service will not seek out that organization the next time they decide to use a similar product or service. In highly competitive markets where prices are about the same between organizations, service is the only attribute in the Perceived Value formula that distinguishes high-quality organizations from mediocre organizations.

As a customer service professional, you are responsible for managing the customer encounter so the customer perceives that she or he has received outstanding service. You can do this by:

- ◆ Showing customers that you value their business.
- ◆ Understanding customer behavior and creating positive outcomes.
- ◆ Asking the right questions.
- ◆ Dealing effectively with customer hand-offs.
- ◆ Making the customer’s problem your problem.
- ◆ Telling customers “no” effectively.
- ◆ Closing the customer encounter effectively.
- ◆ Following through to ensure customer satisfaction.

You are responsible for managing the customer encounter so the customer perceives that she or he has received outstanding service.

Showing Customers That You Value Their Business

Your first step in creating a successful customer encounter is to let customers know that you value them and their business. Remember, customers take their business where they feel it is appreciated. Consider the following example:

- Rosa needs to return a gift to a large department store. She waits patiently in line and finally gets to the return clerk. The clerk, who is very busy, does not look up, but carries on a conversation with another clerk. Rosa tries to get the clerk’s attention to ask her a question about something else she would like to purchase. The clerk reluctantly looks up and tells

● Managing the Customer Encounter

Rosa, “I don’t know anything about that. You’ll have to ask someone in that department.” Rosa gets the refund and leaves the store. “It’ll be a long time before I shop there again,” Rosa says to herself as she walks to her car.

Successful customer encounters *always* leave the customer feeling valued.

Successful customer encounters *always* leave the customer feeling valued. Sometimes when you are very busy or having a difficult day, you may be tempted to hurry through a customer encounter or not pay attention to what a customer is saying. But as the previous example illustrates, doing so may result in the permanent loss of a customer’s business.

Following is a list of actions that may cause customers to think they aren’t valued. Be honest with yourself—have you ever done any of these? Check those that apply.

- Failing to greet customers when they walk up to you.
- Not making eye contact when talking with a customer.
- Making customers stand in long lines.
- Handing off a customer several times.
- Doing paperwork when talking to a customer.
- Trying to handle two customers at once.
- Allowing a coworker to interrupt when talking to a customer.
- Answering the phone when talking with a customer.
- Not using good questioning and feedback skills when handling a customer’s problem.
- Wasting a customer’s time through inefficiency.
- Failing to follow up on what you said you would do.

These are only a few of the signals that tell people they aren’t important to us. What does your list look like? The key concept here is to greet customers cordially, pay attention to them, and avoid distractions.

Take a Moment

From the previous list, pick the action that you engage in most frequently and develop an action plan for improving your customer service behavior.

I am most guilty of _____.

I will take the following actions that will let the customer know that I care:

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



Understanding Customer Behavior and Creating Positive Outcomes

- Sharon hung up the phone and rubbed her ear. Sometimes she just didn't understand her customers. "I don't know why he yelled at me like that," she thought. "All I wanted to do was help him."

Why do customers behave the way they do, and how can a customer service professional influence that behavior? As we discussed previously, *behavior* involves action; it is something other people can see us do. Behaviors are triggered by a *stimulus*—something in the environment that inspires us to act. A stimulus can be the stop sign that causes us to put on the brakes or the hunger pangs that tell us to reach for a snack. Whatever their nature, these stimuli lead us to act or behave in certain ways. In turn, the way we behave based on those stimuli leads to a positive or negative *outcome*—we avoid hitting an oncoming car or our hunger pangs are satisfied. Figure 1 below illustrates this process.

Trigger—leads to—**Behavior**—leads to—**Outcome**

Figure 1

● Managing the Customer Encounter

People are more likely to respond to stimuli when they perceive that the outcome of their behavior will:

- ◆ Be immediate.
- ◆ Be positive.
- ◆ Have a high probability of happening.

They are less likely to respond when they believe that a positive outcome will occur sometime in the future or has a low probability of happening, or when they believe the outcome will be negative.

If you can determine what the customer believes is a positive outcome and offer it quickly, you can influence customer behavior in the direction you and the customer want to go.

What does this mean for you as a customer service representative? If you can determine what the customer believes is a positive outcome and offer it quickly, you can influence customer behavior in the direction you and the customer want to go. In other words, you create a win/win situation. Consider the following example:

- A customer wants to return a sweater that doesn't fit, but she doesn't have her receipt. Store policy states that the salesperson cannot make a refund without a receipt, and a large sign at the cash register outlines the policy.

Before the salesperson on duty can say anything, the customer starts yelling, demanding her money and threatening never to shop at the store again. Why is she behaving this way? First, she probably believes she is not going to be able to exchange the sweater or get a refund (negative outcome) without a hassle. She believes that in order to get what she wants (positive outcome) she has to exhibit behaviors that indicate she is upset.

This situation illustrates a customer service policy that triggers negative behaviors in customers. If the customer knew that the salesperson was willing to work with her, she would probably exhibit pleasant behaviors. If the salesperson has the latitude, she could ask a question, such as "Would you like to select another sweater?" By doing this, she would create an immediate, certain, and positive outcome for the customer. This would increase the likelihood the customer would be satisfied with the encounter and return.

Note: Customer service representatives sometimes reinforce negative behaviors in customers. We have created a group of consumers who believe they must get angry, yell, or make a scene to get what they want. We unintentionally reinforce that behavior by giving in to their demands. People who do not exhibit this type of behavior may not get what they want under the same circumstances. Try to provide satisfaction for all customers, especially those that approach you with courtesy and respect. If a customer tries to create a scene, defuse the situation, then deal with the request.

Take a Moment

Can you think of a situation in which a customer behaved badly because he or she believed this would bring about the desired outcome? How could you have worked with the customer to defuse the situation and achieve an outcome beneficial to both of you?



3

Asking the Right Questions

To help customers achieve the outcome they want—make a purchase or resolve a need—you need information. And in order to get that information, you need to ask the right questions.

Good questioning techniques use two types of probing questions: open and closed. *Open probes* are questions that require the customer to provide more than a yes-or-no answer, as in this example:

- “Please describe your garden and the plants you’d like to grow.”

Closed-probe questions, on the other hand, require only a short answer—usually “yes” or “no.” You get limited, but specific information with closed-probe questions.

Generally, open-probe questions are good when used early in the conversation. They get the customer talking and give you an

Good questioning techniques use two types of probing questions: open and closed.

When we ask questions without making assumptions, customers will give us all the information we need to help them.

opportunity to gather information quickly. Starting with closed probes requires you to do a lot of guessing, and you'll miss hearing a lot of information that the customer might have volunteered with an open probe. When we ask questions without making assumptions, customers will give us all the information we need to help them. Two great open probes are "Tell me more," and "Can you give me more detail?"

You can think of customer conversations as working like a funnel, as illustrated by Figure 2. Like the funnel opening, the open-probe questions are designed to catch a lot of information. Begin with them; then use closed-probe questions to establish specific details toward the end of the conversation. A word of caution is needed here: Be careful not to waste the customer's time (especially the "don't waste my time" customer) trying to collect irrelevant information.

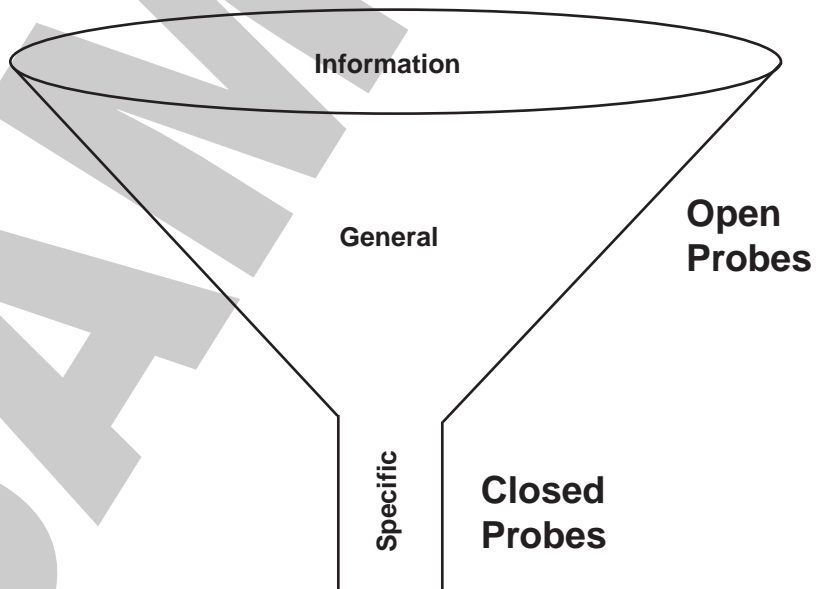


Figure 2

Take a Moment



Assume you are talking with a customer and the customer makes the following statements. Write an open- and a closed-probe question for each statement.

Statement:

“Ms. Clark, your company keeps sending me these overdue invoices. I call every month and someone tells me it will be taken care of by accounting. Why can’t you get accounting to straighten it out?”

Open-probe question: _____

Closed-probe question: _____

Statement:

“Mr. Evans, I am looking for a new clothes dryer for my mother. She has had one for over 15 years and it’s about worn out.”

Open-probe question: _____

Closed-probe question: _____

Do you use more open- or closed-probe questions in your customer conversations? If you are like most Americans, you use more closed-probe questions. Just listen to a conversation and see for yourself. If you record your telephone conversations for quality control purposes, review your own tape. You will probably be surprised.

Dealing Effectively with Customer Hand-Offs

Consider the following phone conversation from a customer to an insurance company:

Receptionist:

ABC Insurance Company, how may I direct your call?

Customer:

I'd like to talk to someone about an insurance claim. I've had an accident.

Receptionist:

Just a minute while I connect you.

Claims Agent:

Hello, my name is Dan Smith. How may I help you?

Customer:

I just had an accident and I have insurance with you. I need to make a claim.

Claims Agent:

Can you tell me about the accident?

Customer:

Sure, I was backing my car out of my house and hit the corner of the garage.

Claims Agent:

I'm sorry, I only handle homeowner claims. Let me connect you with Mary. She handles auto claims. (Pause while customer is put on hold.) I'm sorry, she's at lunch now. Could you call back after lunch?

Take a Moment

What good customer service behaviors are demonstrated by the previous interaction?

What customer service behaviors would improve this scenario?



Customers value their time just as you do. As a general rule, they don't mind being handed off to another customer service representative *one time*. For most customers, the frustration level goes up significantly when they are handed off more than once. Not getting to the person who can solve the problem leaves customers with the impression that the members of your organization don't know what they're doing. It also makes the situation difficult for the customer service representative who actually can help them. By the time those customers get to the right person, they're frustrated and ready to vent.

Successful hand-offs begin with your knowing exactly who can help a customer if you cannot. *Remember, you are responsible for getting customers to the right person and making sure their expectations are met.* Here are some tips for handing off customers when necessary.

Most customers don't mind being handed off to another customer service representative *one time*.

When the customer is face to face:

- ◆ Introduce yourself and get the customer's first and last name.
- ◆ Make sure you get enough information to get the customer to the right person. In our opening example, a few questions would have gotten the customer to the right insurance agent.
- ◆ Tell the customer the name of the person that can help. For example, "Bill Jones is our specialist in that area. I'll introduce you to him."
- ◆ Personally introduce the customer to the person who can help. For example, "Bill, I'd like you to meet Angie Cupp. She's interested in our new business software."
- ◆ Make sure this person can help the customer. For example, ask Bill, "Do you have time to assist Angie?" Find out how long it will be before Bill can help, and ask the customer if that is acceptable. If not, get Bill to call her back. If the customer chooses to wait, stay with the customer; offer a cup of coffee or a soft drink.
- ◆ Thank the customer for allowing you to help. "Angie, thank you for shopping with us, and if I can be of any more assistance, please let me know." Be sure to tell the customer your name and how she can find you if she needs help.

When the customer is on the phone:

- ◆ With a smile in your voice, get the customer's name and give yours again.
- ◆ Ask a few questions to get information that will help you direct the customer to the right person.
- ◆ Tell the customer the name of the person who can help.
- ◆ Tell the customer that you will have to put him or her on hold for a minute but will be right back.

- ◆ Call the person who can help the customer and give that person the customer's name and any additional information you have.
- ◆ Make sure the person can help the customer at this time.
- ◆ If your coworker cannot help the customer at this time, find someone who can or set up a time when the person who can help will call the customer.
- ◆ Tell the customer that you will connect him or her to the person who can help. For example, "Ms. Adams, I will connect you with Chad Davis, who will assist you."
- ◆ When you receive a customer hand-off, put a smile in your voice and greet the customer. For example, "Good morning Ms. Adams, I'm Chad Davis. How may I help you?"
- ◆ If you cannot find someone who can help the customer, you need to take ownership of the customer's needs. You should find out when the right person will be available and let the customer know. Give the customer your name, phone number, and the name and phone number of the person who will help them. Follow up with the customer to make sure they have their needs met. If a hand-off fails, it does not matter who caused the problem or dropped the ball. In the customer's eyes, it is a failure of every employee at your organization, and everyone suffers when a customer does not return.

If you cannot find someone who can help the customer, you need to take ownership of the customer's needs.

Making the Customer's Problem Your Problem

- "All I do all day long is solve other people's problems," Brian complained about his job at the software help desk. "How can customers be so dumb? Why don't they read the owner's manual? It answers most of their questions. It even has a troubleshooting section. They want to blame us for not making the computers more user friendly. I wish they would solve their own problems instead of calling me."

Many of the customers you encounter come to you because they have a problem they need help solving. They may have even

created the problem themselves. This is where your attitude toward problem solving comes into play. How you view the customer problem determines your actions and enthusiasm in helping solve the problem. The best way to view *the customer's problem* is as *your problem*.

Viewing the customer's problem as your own helps focus your attention on a winning solution rather than just "getting the customer off my back."

Your job is to create a win for the customer if at all possible. Viewing the customer's problem as your own helps focus your attention on a winning solution rather than just "getting the customer off my back." Here are five steps that will help you and the customer solve your problem:

1. **Define the problem.**

Your first step is to come up with a specific definition of the problem. The best way to do this is by listening to the customer. Sometimes the customer may be upset or even verbally abusive, but hidden in the emotional words is a perceived problem that is very real to the customer. Listen for the problem. You may want to write the problem down. You should also note what caused the problem if you know or suspect. These causes do not have to be discussed in great detail with the customer. However, they will provide you with useful information when you are trying to improve your customer service system (see Chapter 5).

2. **List alternatives.**

One solution does not fit all customers, even if the problem is the same. Offer alternatives to the customer. Try asking customers for their suggestions for solving the problem. This gives customers ownership in the solution as well as a sense of control.

3. **Pick a solution.**

Picking a solution that is satisfactory to both the customer and you is crucial to good customer relations. If the customer participates in the selection, this will build ownership and acceptance.

4. **Implement the solution.**

This is the step where most problem solvers have difficulty. People have good intentions but, for a variety of reasons, sometimes fail to implement what they said they would do. The consequence of not implementing the solution to a

customer problem is severely damaged customer relationships. Making notes or creating a “to do” list helps.

5. **Make sure the problem is solved.**

Making sure the problem is solved goes beyond just checking that the agreed-upon actions have been implemented. The customer has to determine if the solution has solved his or her problem. This will require follow-up on your part. Ask the customer if the problem was solved.

When dealing with customer problems, you should always follow the five steps. It does not matter how simple or complex the problem, the problem-solving process will work. Sometimes the entire process can take five minutes, or it can take five months. The steps are the same.

Consider how you would use the five-step process to deal with the situation described in the following case study:

- John takes his car to a mechanic because the front of the car is making a noise that has gotten progressively worse. The mechanic looks at the car and test drives it. He tells John that a slipping fan belt is making the noise and that the fan belt should be replaced and adjusted. The mechanic does the work and shows John the worn fan belt that was replaced.

Three days later, John returns with the car and tells the mechanic that the noise is still there. Again, the mechanic listens and test drives the car. He concludes that the water pump is now making a noise. The water pump was probably worn, and replacing the fan belt put too much additional stress on it, creating the noise. Eventually, the pump must be replaced. The mechanic must now explain the situation to John.





Take a Moment

Defining the problem is the first step in the problem-solving process. If you were the mechanic, how would you define the problem for John? Write your statement below.

What are the next two steps the mechanic needs to take to guide John through the problem-solving process? What could he say in each step?

Step 2: _____

Step 3: _____

The mechanic in our case study might handle the situation in the following way:

Mechanic:

John, the noise you're hearing now is the water pump. Have you heard this noise before?

John:

I don't remember hearing it.

Mechanic:

Sometimes when we replace a fan belt and tighten it to factory specifications, a marginal water pump may fail. That seems to be what's happening here. [*Define the problem.*] I think that this water pump will last a little while longer. I could try adding some water pump lubricant to the coolant, which might help. However, I suggest that you replace it as soon as possible, especially if you're planning any trips. [*List alternatives.*] What would you like me to do? [*Pick a solution.*]

The mechanic could then complete the problem-solving process by implementing whatever solution John chose and following up to be sure that the solution worked for John.

Telling the Customer “No”

No matter how good your problem-solving skills, you will encounter situations in which you have to tell a customer “no.” Consider the following example:

- Claudine is a customer service representative with the local electric company. Max, who has just moved into the area, has come in to have the electricity to his house turned on. He completes the information and authorizes a credit check. Claudine calls his previous electric provider and finds that Max left without paying his final bill, and it is three months overdue. Claudine has to tell Max, who is waiting in the lobby, that she will need a \$150 deposit or she will not be able to authorize a hook-up. Claudine calls Max into her office.

If you were Claudine, what would you say to Max?

Claudine tells Max that he must pay the \$150. He responds with, “Why do I have to pay a deposit? My cousin moved here last spring, and he didn’t have to pay anything. All you electric companies are alike! You don’t care about my situation.”

How would you respond to Max’s statement?

The key to moving forward in this situation is to work with Max to reach a win/win situation. What Claudine is able to do for Max will depend on company guidelines and state laws. She may be able to offer a payment plan for the \$150 or perhaps take a credit card. Whatever she eventually offers, Claudine must remain firm but respectful when dealing with Max and show empathy for his feelings.

No matter how much you wish to help your customers, you will occasionally find yourself in situations in which you are unable to correct the problem or meet customer requests. So how do you say “no” without losing the customer? The following steps can help you successfully deliver a “no” message.

● Managing the Customer Encounter

1. **Apologize for not being able to meet expectations.**

- “I’m sorry, but we can’t fill the order until next week.”

2. **Give them facts about the situation, not excuses.**

- “There’s been such a demand for these boots that the factory is behind in filling our order.”

Whether customers view your statements as facts or excuses will depend on how willing they are to trust you. If you have followed the principles of good customer service in past encounters with your customers, they will be more likely to view your statement as fact.

Avoid statements such as “the policy does not allow me to give you a refund.”

Avoid statements such as “the policy does not allow me to give you a refund.” While this may be a fact, the customer will generally see you as hiding behind an excuse. Try to explain the reasons for the policy. For example, if your policy requires you to get a photo identification when you accept travelers’ checks, say, “Our identification policy allows us to ensure that no one will cash your checks except you.”

Policies do not fit every situation, and customer service representatives should be allowed to use their own judgment. Whenever possible, well-trained customer service representatives should be given guidelines rather than rules.

3. **Be firm with the customer, but gentle.**

This may seem like a contradiction in terms, but it isn’t. What it means is that you can be firm without making the customer feel rejected or deserted. Part of being gentle is acknowledging the customer’s feelings. When you say “no,” the customer is disappointed. The intensity of the feeling will depend on how the customer views the importance of the request. Acknowledging how the customer feels demonstrates empathy. Consider the following example:

- You are the maitre d’ at a small, popular restaurant. It is Saturday night, all the tables are full, and a large party has reserved a corner of the restaurant for a private party.

Mary Alice and David, two regular customers, come in without a reservation. They ask for a table and you have none to give them. What can you do?

You could handle the situation by saying, “I’m sorry, David and Mary Alice, but I will not be able to seat you this evening. I know how disappointed you must feel. We have a group of 22 people that reserved an area of the restaurant for a party. I’ll be glad to make a reservation for you for tomorrow, and the drinks will be on me.”

4. **Remain calm if customers continue their demands.**

Some customers will continue to push you even after you have told them you cannot meet their expectations. When this happens, keep in mind that they are not mad at you as an individual. Chances are, they are having difficulty dealing with their feelings. Most of the time they are mad at the situation and may take it out on you. But remain calm, be firm, and be gentle. Repeat the steps above.

Sometimes customers persist, and conflict may develop. We’ll discuss how to handle conflict in Chapter 4. If a customer becomes loud or animated, move the conversation out of earshot of other customers. Not moving can upset some of your customers and leave them with a negative impression of your organization.

5. **Focus on what you *can* do.**

Whenever possible, follow a “no” with what you can do for the customer. At this point, you may want to follow the steps in the problem-solving process discussed earlier in the chapter. Examine these two statements:

- “We don’t carry that model.”
- “We don’t carry that model, but we do carry a similar model with all the features of the one you want at an attractive price.”

By offering alternatives, you provide customers with an opportunity to consider other options that may not have occurred to them. This gives them a sense of control. Your effort demonstrates that you value their business and are willing to help. Remember, they are trying to fulfill a need or desire. This

Whenever possible, follow a “no” with what you can do for the customer.

strategy can turn a loss into a gain for you and the customer.

6. **Review your interaction and learn.**

Take time to examine what happened and learn from each customer encounter. Review the encounter and focus on what you did well. Don't blame yourself for any mistakes you made. These are opportunities to learn. Decide how you could handle the situation better next time. Someone once said that experience is the master teacher. However, it is only the master teacher if we learn and apply what we learn. So, practice, practice, practice.

Closing the Customer Encounter

The closing moments of a customer encounter, even a brief encounter, are critical. If you leave customers with a positive impression, they will return. But if you leave them with a negative impression, you will destroy all the rapport and trust that you have worked so hard to establish.

Closings provide an opportunity to ensure that you have met the customer's needs. Following these steps can help you leave the customer with a positive impression:

Closings provide an opportunity to ensure that you have met the customer's needs.

- ◆ Smile sincerely.
- ◆ Stand if the customer is standing.
- ◆ Shake hands.
- ◆ Ask if there is anything else you can do for the customer.
- ◆ Give customers your name and phone number or a business card.
- ◆ Invite customers to call or visit if they have questions or concerns.
- ◆ Make an appropriate personal comment, such as complimenting them on their purchase or telling them you're glad that you were able to resolve their problem.
- ◆ Thank the customer for coming in or calling.

Make sure your body language and tone of voice reinforce the words you are using. A smile is your most effective tool in closing a conversation, whether in person or over the phone. Putting a smile on your face, even if you don't feel like smiling, will influence your attitude, body language, and tone of voice.

Take a Moment

What do you consciously do when you know the customer is about to leave?

Review the previous list. Identify two new behaviors you could try that would improve the close of your customer encounters, and write them below.



Following Through with the Customer

The close of the customer encounter isn't the end of your contact with the customer. An important final step is providing follow-up to ensure that the customer is satisfied and received everything that you promised.

Customers expect you to do what you say you will do when you say you will do it. Sometimes you have to involve others in meeting customer needs or solving customer problems. Based on what they agree to do for you, tell the customer what will be done. If the people on whom you are depending fail to live up to their responsibilities, you are left in an embarrassing position (another argument for good internal customer service). However, you are still responsible for making sure things get done.

● Managing the Customer Encounter

The best way to ensure customer satisfaction is to stay in touch with the customer.

The best way to ensure customer satisfaction is to stay in touch with the customer. Let the customer know if there is a change in plans. Never leave the customer guessing when something will get done when agreed-upon actions and times have passed. Following are a few other tips to help you provide your customers with effective follow-up:

- ◆ If you told a customer you would do something and find that it is not possible or will take longer than expected, let the customer know. Keep the customer posted as to what is happening.
- ◆ Follow up with phone calls to make sure customers are happy with the product or service.
- ◆ Send thank you cards with return comment cards.
- ◆ Ask the customer if all his or her needs were met during closing comments.
- ◆ Conduct a formal customer satisfaction survey.
- ◆ Provide customer service hot lines, e-mail addresses, and suggestion boxes.
- ◆ Have everyone, including management, ask the customer his or her perception of service.
- ◆ Create a Web page that gives customers product and service information and allows them to give you feedback.

Take a Moment

Think of a recent situation in which you or your company did not follow through with a customer or meet expectations. In the space provided, describe what happened.



Situation details:

What caused the poor follow-through with the customer?

What could you have done to prevent this situation from happening?

What could others have done to prevent this situation from happening?

Chapter Summary

The customer encounter is the most critical step in the customer service system. If the encounter is positive, the customer leaves satisfied, but if the encounter is negative, the customer may never return.

As a customer service professional, your job is to create an immediate and positive encounter for the customer. You can do this by:

- ◆ Showing customers that you value their business.
- ◆ Understanding customer behavior and creating positive outcomes.
- ◆ Asking the right questions.
- ◆ Dealing effectively with customer hand-offs.
- ◆ Making the customer's problem your problem.
- ◆ Telling customers "no" effectively.
- ◆ Closing the customer encounter effectively.
- ◆ Following through to ensure customer satisfaction.

Following these steps will help you provide your customers with outstanding customer service that will increase your product's or service's Perceived Value in the eyes of your customers and make your organization stand out from the rest.

Self-Check: Chapter Three Review



Answers to these questions appear on pages 101 and 102.

1. Your first step in creating a successful customer encounter is to let customers know that

2. True or False?
Customers are looking for consequences that are immediate, certain, and positive.

3. Open-probe questions require the customer to

_____.

4. What are the five steps to follow when solving any problem?

a. _____

b. _____

d. _____

e. _____

5. When handing off a customer to another customer service representative, what two things are you responsible for?

a. _____

b. _____

6. True or False?
When telling a customer “no,” you can maintain a positive relationship with the customer by focusing on what you *can* do rather than what you *can't*.

Chapter *Four*

Handling Complaints and Conflicts

Chapter Objectives

- ▶ Determine why your customers complain.
- ▶ Recognize five different conflict styles.
- ▶ Follow a five-step technique for dealing with upset customers.
- ▶ Control your emotions when dealing with stressful situations.

“**N**ot another message from Mrs. Miller,” Matilda groaned as she checked her voice mail. “It must be her air conditioner again. She says it’s making a funny noise, but we’ve sent service technicians out to look at it three times, and none of them can find anything wrong with it. I think she just likes to complain. I know she shops here a lot, but I wish she’d stop calling me.”



Take a Moment

If you received this message, what would you say to Mrs. Miller when you returned her call?

When customers are dissatisfied, they express their displeasure in a number of ways. Some dissatisfied customers will complain, but a number of others will say nothing. Research suggests that more than 95 percent of the customers who are unhappy with your organization will not complain to anyone within the organization. However, most will tell at least one other person outside the organization. Many will tell 10, 15, or even 20 people about their displeasure, which is certainly bad

advertising for your organization. Some will embellish the story the more times it is told. Worst of all, more than 60 percent of all your dissatisfied customers will never return.

And what about the customers who do complain? Though it may be hard to believe, many customers complain because they really care about your organization. These customers feel a sense of loyalty. They are surprised that their expectations were not met and are offering their time and energy to point out areas they perceive as needing improvement. Unfortunately, some are not very tactful in displaying their dissatisfaction.

Many customers complain because they really care about your organization.

Keep in mind that while complaining customers may not always be “right,” they believe they are and feel that their “righteous indignation” is justified. More than 90 percent of your complaining customers will remain loyal if you resolve their concerns. If you exceed their expectations when solving their problems, they will tell others about you. This is the best advertising your organization can have—and it’s free!

Determining Why Your Customers Complain

As we saw in Chapter 3, you can turn a customer complaint into a positive experience for yourself and the customer by following the steps for a successful customer encounter. As you follow these steps, however, remember that customer complaints carry an additional responsibility for the customer service professional—you need to determine *why* each customer is complaining and gather enough information to help your organization *correct* those situations that cause complaints.

Customers complain for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they complain because a product or service failed to live up to their expectations. In these situations, you should look on customer complaints as valuable feedback that can help your organization continually improve its output. As you work with customers to resolve this type of problem, take notes on the difficulties customers are having so you can pass on the information to someone who can correct the root cause of the problem.

● Handling Complaints and Conflicts

In other situations, customers may complain about the customer service they receive rather than the product itself. Here are a few behaviors and attitudes that customers frequently complain about. Put a checkmark by any that your organization's customers have complained about recently.

- Product or service was not delivered as scheduled.
- Customer had to wait for a long period of time (in person or on the phone).
- Customer had to stand in line for a long period of time.
- Salesperson did not listen to customer.
- Customer felt he or she was being "treated like a number."
- Customer complained, and customer service rep acted as though he or she did not believe the problem.
- Customer service rep was not able to resolve problem.
- Customer felt helpless, as though the situation were out of control.



Take a Moment

In the space below, list four recent customer complaints you have received.

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

Now pick one of the situations you listed above and describe the feelings you would have if you were a customer in the same situation.

Recognizing Different Conflict Styles

No matter how hard you work with customers to resolve their complaints, conflicts will develop. Different people handle conflict in different ways. Some resolve the conflict calmly, others yell, and others simply avoid the matter altogether. We may deal with conflicts very differently depending on the nature of the conflict and the other people involved. We can refer to the way we *most typically* handle conflict as our *conflict style*.

Our conflict style is based on our approach to two dimensions of conflict: our concern for the other person/relationship (*cooperativeness*) and our concern for our own self-interests (*assertiveness*). Our conflict style is determined by how willing we are to cooperate and how much we want to get our way.

Take a Moment

Think of how you generally deal with conflict or disagreement. Check the answer that best fits you.

1. When dealing with conflict or disagreement, I try to preserve the relationship
 - All of the time.
 - Most of the time.
 - Some of the time.
 - None of the time.
2. When dealing with conflict or disagreement, I try to get my way
 - All of the time.
 - Most of the time.
 - Some of the time.
 - None of the time.



● Handling Complaints and Conflicts

When we approach a disagreement, we tend to demonstrate one of five general conflict styles.

When we approach a disagreement, we tend to demonstrate one of five general conflict styles according to our level of cooperativeness and assertiveness:

1. **Partners**

This style of conflict is high in cooperativeness and assertiveness. People exhibiting this style tend to want to cooperate yet win. This means they will work to resolve a situation in a win/win fashion. It is usually easy to resolve problems when people exhibit this style. They will let you know what they want and are willing to work with you to get it.

2. **Obligors**

This style of conflict is high in cooperativeness but low on assertiveness. People exhibiting this style approach problem solving in a conciliatory manner. They give in to accommodate others because they are willing to give up what they want in order to preserve the relationship. But, though they give in easily, they walk away with a sense of loss. You will have to dig to understand what they really want, because they will not tell you without prompting. Customers exhibiting this style will often take a lot of abuse, but when the conflict is over, they will never return.

3. **Competitors**

This style is assertive but not very cooperative. People exhibiting this style deal with conflict by trying to get their way. They will tell you what they want and may sometimes appear inflexible and uncooperative. They want to win. We all tend to demonstrate this style when the conflict is a matter of principle or violates one of our values.

4. **Avoiders**

This style of conflict is not very cooperative and not very assertive. People exhibiting this style want to avoid conflict. They may not care about the solution, or they just hope the problem will go away. They generally will not tell you what's wrong, and if you ask them what the problem is, they often respond, "Oh, nothing." Their facial expression will sometimes let you know that they disagree.

5. Negotiators

This style of conflict tends to be somewhat cooperative and somewhat assertive. People exhibiting this style are both interested in getting what they want and preserving the relationship. They are, therefore, willing to give in on some (but not all) issues in order to compromise. They will generally tell you what they want and work with you to get it.

Take a Moment

Based on the previous descriptions, which conflict style do you think you exhibit most often?

- Partner
- Obligor
- Competitor
- Avoider
- Negotiator



When dealing with customer dissatisfaction, you need to consider both your conflict style and the customer's. You cannot control a customer's approach to conflict resolution, but you can control your own. Once you recognize which style a customer is exhibiting, you can adopt the conflict style that best fits the situation.

For example, if the customer exhibits a Competitor style and you adopt the same style, the conflict will escalate with no hope of resolution as both of you compete to win. A more effective approach would be for you to adopt an Obligor or Negotiator style and compromise with the customer—if you are empowered to make the necessary decisions.



Take a Moment

Describe a recent conflict situation that did not have an acceptable ending for you or the customer.

Which conflict style did the other person exhibit?

Which conflict style did you exhibit?

Which conflict style would have brought an acceptable resolution if you had exhibited it instead?

What would you do differently next time?

Calming Upset Customers

- Two customers complain about receiving a cold steak in a restaurant. One calls the server over to the table and politely asks the server to warm the steak and then bring it back. The other calls the server to the table and in a loud, sarcastic tone of voice asks, “What kind of restaurant are you running here? My steak is cold! Let me talk to the manager!”

In the previous example, the same issue triggered very different behaviors in the two people. We might describe the first customer as simply being displeased because of her low emotional level. We might describe the second customer as being upset or demanding because of the high level of emotion he expressed.

Customers become upset for many reasons. Sometimes people who are usually agreeable happen to be having a bad day. If you

catch them at the wrong moment, they take their frustration out on you. Some may even become unruly and disruptive over what appear to be insignificant issues. Often, these temporarily grumpy people will end up apologizing to you about their behavior. Accept such apologies graciously.

Other customers become upset because they believe this behavior will get them what they want. Remember our discussion of behavior and its outcomes in Chapter 2. If customers believe that unruly behavior will bring immediate, positive results, they may use it to get what they want. Unfortunately, customer service representatives reinforce this type of behavior by paying special attention to these customers. Do not mistake rude, unpleasant, or obnoxious people as requiring the most attention. The person who complains politely deserves as much, if not more, attention as the person who makes a scene.

Do not mistake rude, unpleasant, or obnoxious people as requiring the most attention.

Whatever the reason for your customer's unruly behavior, the following steps should help you calm the customer and defuse the situation:

1. **Recognize that the customer is not angry at you personally.** The customer is angry at the organization. You represent the organization, and most customers believe you have more control over what happens than you do. Not taking customer remarks personally can be difficult, especially when a customer is “in your face.” Make a point of ignoring unpleasant remarks, and focus on completing the remaining steps in this process.
2. **Acknowledge that a problem exists.** This does not mean you have to agree or take the blame. If the customer is unhappy, you must become a participant in resolving the problem. Say something like, “Let’s see how I can help you.”
3. **Tell the customer what you can do, not what you can’t do.** Telling upset customers what you can’t do only frustrates them more. Focus on the future, not the past. Help the customer generate alternative solutions, and move forward with what you can do for them. You will probably want to use the problem-solving steps discussed in Chapter 3.

● Handling Complaints and Conflicts

4. **Keep the lines of communication open.**

This is not the time to give ultimatums—that will only close the conversation. If you can't give customers what they want, ask for alternatives and suggestions. Sometimes you will simply have to say “no,” but not until you've considered every possibility.

5. **Stay in control of your emotions at all times.**

You have a better chance of resolving an upset customer's problems when you respond with calming behaviors. Don't exhibit the same hostile behaviors as the customer. Chances are, other customers are watching you and how you deal with the situation. You best represent the company and yourself when you act professionally. Responding with genuine concern for the customer will often reduce his or her emotions. Try saying something like, “This seems to have really upset you, and I want to help solve this problem.”

On occasion, some customers may become abusive. Abusive behavior goes beyond just being rude or loud. Abusive behavior includes:

- ◆ Abusive or obscene language (calling you vulgar names).
- ◆ Violent threats against your organization.
- ◆ Personal threats against you.

No customer service professional should have to put up with abuse. Here are some tips for handling abusive customers:

1. In a calm but firm voice, tell abusive customers that you will not allow them to attack you verbally. If they persist, you will not be able to handle their problem.
2. Ask abusive customers if they would like to talk to your supervisor. You should inform the supervisor when a customer has been abusive so your supervisor will know what to expect. Don't use this as a crutch. It should be used when you have exhausted all your options.
3. Develop a security action plan to help you deal with situations in which a customer becomes physically abusive or needs to be removed.

No customer service professional should have to put up with abuse.

Controlling Your Own Emotions

In spite of your best efforts, a particularly frustrating customer or situation may leave you feeling that you are about to lose control of your own emotions. How can you remain in control? The first step is to understand what triggers your emotional reactions. For example, you may find that you get angry when people yell at you or when you feel embarrassed. Try keeping a record of what was happening when you displayed emotions.

Once you understand what triggers your emotions, you can develop an action plan to help you cope with those situations. For example, if you discovered that you get angry when someone yells at you, you may want to say to yourself, “This person isn’t angry with me; he’s angry at the situation. I can help this person if I stay in control.”

You may find it helpful to put yourself in the other person’s place for just a moment. Ask yourself, “How would I feel if this happened to me?” If you have trouble understanding the other person’s reaction, ask questions to gain insight and understanding. Showing concern in this way may reduce their emotional display—and yours as well.

Recognizing the humor in an emotional situation can also be helpful. However, remember that humor can be a double-edged sword at emotional times—use it appropriately. Make sure the humor is directed at you—never make fun of the customer. When used correctly, humor can be a powerful stress reducer.

You may also find it helpful to take a time-out. This involves taking time away from the stressful situation to relax and regain your composure. You should usually take a time-out after the customer encounter is over. However, it may be necessary to take a time-out during a very emotional confrontation.

During a time-out, concentrate on something positive rather than the situation that generated the emotion. If possible, leave the area where the emotionally charged event occurred. Try going for coffee, going for a walk, performing deep breathing exercises, or going to visit a person who is always upbeat.

Once you understand what triggers your emotions, you can develop an action plan to help you cope with those situations.

● Handling Complaints and Conflicts

No matter how hard organizations work to produce quality products and services, there will always be situations in which customers are dissatisfied. By adjusting your conflict style to your customer's, calming upset customers, and keeping your own emotions in check, you can remain in control of complaint situations and develop win/win resolutions that will benefit both your customer and your organization.

SAMPLE

Chapter Summary

When customers are dissatisfied, they express their displeasure in a variety of ways. Some will complain, but more than 95 percent of your dissatisfied customers will not tell anyone within your organization.

Many of the customers who do complain care about your organization and want to help it improve. They may complain because a product failed to meet their expectations, or they may be dissatisfied with the level of service they received. Part of your responsibility as a customer service professional is to correct those situations that cause your customers to complain.

No matter how hard you work with customers to resolve their complaints, conflicts can develop. When we deal with a conflict, we tend to demonstrate one of five general conflict styles based on our level of cooperativeness and assertiveness. The five styles are:

- ◆ Partners
- ◆ Obligers
- ◆ Competitors
- ◆ Avoiders
- ◆ Negotiators

Once you recognize which style a customer is exhibiting, you can adopt the conflict style that best fits the situation.

Customers become upset for many reasons. The following steps can help calm your customer and defuse the situation:

1. Recognize that the customer is not angry at you personally.
2. Acknowledge that a problem exists.
3. Tell the customer what you can do, not what you can't do.
4. Keep the lines of communication open.
5. Stay in control of your emotions at all times.

● Handling Complaints and Conflicts

You can remain in control of your emotions by:

- ◆ Trying to understand what triggers your emotions.
- ◆ Putting yourself in the customer's place.
- ◆ Recognizing the humor in the situation.
- ◆ Taking a time-out.

Self-Check: Chapter Four Review



Answers may be found on page 102.

1. Over _____ percent of the customers who are upset with your organization will say nothing to anyone within the organization.
2. What are the two dimensions of conflict?
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
3. True or False?
Most people deal with conflict in the same way.
4. True or False?
Most of the customers that are upset with us want to get even.
5. True or False?
Asking yourself, “How would I feel if I was the customer?” can help you handle your emotions.
6. What does taking a “time-out” involve?

Chapter *Five*

Continuously Improving Customer Service

Chapter Objectives

- ▶ Conduct a customer service audit.
- ▶ Review your customer service system.
- ▶ Gain valuable feedback from your customers.
- ▶ Develop an action plan for improving your customer service system.

So far, we have discussed a variety of techniques for improving your communication skills, managing customer encounters, and resolving complaints and conflict. Effectively using these techniques will help you satisfy your customers and increase the Perceived Value (PV) of your product or service. But we have one area left to consider: Does your organization's customer service system support the positive customer relationships you are working to build?

As you might remember from Chapter 1, all customer encounters take place within a *customer service system*. We can define a *system* as a set of interlinking, interdependent parts that work together to make up a whole. Each part contributes to the overall functioning of the whole.

Your entire organization is involved in creating your customer service system, because every part of the organization has a role to play in meeting internal and external customer needs. If every part of your organization is running smoothly, your customer service system should run smoothly as well. But if part of your organization is not running properly, it can affect the quality of service you gave your customers.

Your entire organization is involved in creating your customer service system.

For example, if your shipping department is unable to deliver orders in a timely fashion, your customers will be dissatisfied. You can use all of your best customer service skills to deal with your upset customers, but until the shipping department is able to make its deliveries on schedule, your customers will not be satisfied, and your product's or service's PV will suffer as a result.

In this final chapter, we will consider two ways that you can evaluate and improve the quality of your customer service system: performing a customer service audit and beginning a continuous improvement program. You will then have the opportunity to develop an action plan for improving your customer service.

Conducting a Customer Service Audit

Each part of your organization should be periodically reviewed to determine its contribution to the efficiency and effectiveness of customer service. You can do this by conducting a Customer Service Audit. A Customer Service Audit will improve customer service and increase PV by identifying the root causes of reoccurring customer complaints.

Begin your Customer Service Audit by determining which part of the organization you will review. Then develop a checklist of the specific customer service actions you want to observe and a series of questions that will help you identify how well those actions are being performed. If you have a customer service standard, you can use it to develop some of the questions.

- ◆ Randy, the manager of a hotel, wants to perform a Customer Service Audit on the front desk check-in area. Some questions he wants to ask include:
 - Are customers able to find available parking near the check-in area?
 - Do customers have to wait more than one minute before they are acknowledged?
 - Does the front desk staff greet customers with a smile?
 - Does the front desk staff answer the phone before three rings?

A Customer Service Audit will improve customer service and increase PV by identifying the root causes of reoccurring customer complaints.

● Continuously Improving Customer Service

Notice that these are specific. Avoid general questions such as “Is the front desk staff using good communication skills?” This type of question is too broad and is subject to too much interpretation. Questions should consider specific behaviors so they can be verified by observation.

You may want to develop a rating system for each audit question. For example, this three-tier system is used by many auditors:

- ◆ Exceeds expectations
- ◆ Meets expectations
- ◆ Falls below expectations

Ideally, we would like to have all our ratings in the “exceeds expectations” level.

As you develop your questions, involve other customer service representatives as well as actual customers.

As you develop your questions, involve other customer service representatives as well as actual customers. Customer service representatives can perform the audits, though they will need some training in observation and auditing techniques. Customers can also serve as auditors in some situations. When customer service reps become involved, they must have assurance that the information collected will not be used to blame them or lead to a disciplinary action. If they believe the information will be used against them, they simply will not get serious about the audit process.

During the audit, provide immediate feedback to the members of the department you are auditing. Be sure to give positive feedback when things are done correctly as well as corrective feedback for behaviors that were below expectations. Try to find out what is causing any unacceptable customer service behaviors, and take action to correct those situations. When you complete your Customer Service Audit, keep the results on file so that corrective actions can be verified during the next audit. Review any reoccurring trends to determine their root causes.

Take a Moment

Make a list of 10 specific questions that you and your coworkers can use to conduct a Customer Service Audit. Once you have developed the audit checklist, conduct an audit of your activities.



1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Reviewing Your Customer Service System

You can move beyond auditing individual departments to reviewing your entire customer service system. This is an excellent way to see how the various parts of the system fit together and to make sure that all the actions taken throughout the system work to serve the customer. A convenient and effective way to review and analyze your customer service system is to use the Continuous Improvement Process, which consists of seven steps.

Step 1: Determine the Customer's Expectations of Service

Whenever customers buy a product or service from you, they have certain expectations. You need a clear idea of what these expectations are in order to determine if your customer service system is succeeding. As Stephen Covey puts it, begin with the end in mind.

The best way to learn what customers want from you is to ask them.

Encouraging Customer Feedback

The best way to learn what customers want from you is to ask them. Remember, only 5 percent of your customers will take the time to complain to you if they are dissatisfied; you need to give the other 95 percent a chance to express their feelings.

There are many ways to solicit feedback from customers. If your organization wants to create a survey that statistically reflects all of your customers, it is best to work with a survey expert. An expert can help you identify the demographics of your customer base and select a sample of customers that reflect those demographics. An expert can also help you develop a variety of feedback vehicles, including:

- ◆ Telephone surveys
- ◆ Mail surveys
- ◆ Customer focus/feedback groups
- ◆ Employee surveys
- ◆ Internet surveys
- ◆ Customer comment cards

As a customer service professional, you can also conduct your own informal customer research. Though informal research will not be as statistically accurate as a more structured research project, it can provide you with valuable insights into what your customers are thinking.

On the most basic level, informal customer research involves taking the time to talk with your customers about your products and services and really listening to what they have to say. Keep notes on their reactions, and review your notes

periodically to see if you can identify common reactions. Here are some questions you might ask:

- ◆ “What do you like best about our product/service?”
- ◆ “In what ways could we improve our product/service?”
- ◆ “Have you ever used our competitors’ products/services? How do our products/services compare?”

Avoid global questions such as “Was everything satisfactory?” In fact, a customer may think everything was satisfactory and still not come back because your competitor’s PV is higher than yours. Wouldn’t you like to have products and services that are rated exceptional rather than satisfactory?

Wouldn’t you like to have products and services that are rated exceptional rather than satisfactory?

You can take your informal customer research one step further by preparing a set of questions to ask customers through a survey or focus group. Here are some tips for devising your own customer research:

1. Develop a list of questions and test them on a pilot group. (You can sometimes use employees as a pilot group.) Make sure the questions will help you gain the type of information you seek.
2. Determine how you will collect the data. Will you ask survey questions in person, by mail, or over the telephone, or will you conduct focus groups?
3. Select your sample of interviewees from the population of customers. Be sure that you survey enough customers to allow you to identify any trends in their responses. A good rule of thumb is to survey at least 100 customers. Work with a random sample of customers; in other words, select the sample from the overall population without any regard to who is chosen.

As previously mentioned, though informal customer research can provide you with valuable insight into your customers’ expectations, it does not provide the statistical accuracy of a survey developed and conducted by an expert. If you are considering major changes or significant capital investments, consult a survey professional—it will be worth the investment.

Step 2: Identify the Steps Customers Must Take to Obtain Your Product or Service

In this step, you'll trace the customer service process from your customers' initial contact with your organization through their receipt of your product or service and final billing. Following the flow of this process will help you understand the details of each action or operation you are performing. Remember, every contact your customer has with your organization is a customer encounter. Is the message on your answering machine friendly? Are there enough spaces in your parking lot? Are goods and services delivered on time? Do customers have to wait an unreasonable length of time before they can speak to a customer service rep? Are the bills they receive easy to understand? These are all customer service encounters. Be sure they create positive impressions of your organization instead of negative ones.

Remember, every contact your customer has with your organization is a customer encounter.

Step 3: Go Into Detail

Make a detailed list of all the actions members of your organization perform for customer service. If your company uses a customer order form, identify each time someone does something with the form. Identify how the form moves through the various parts of the customer service system, how long it takes, and what contributes to failures.

Step 4: Evaluate Each Action or Operation to Determine What Is Working Effectively

The goal in this step is to look for ineffective, unnecessary, and inefficient actions or operations. You can evaluate the actions in your customer service system by asking these five questions:

- ◆ What is the customer service action?
- ◆ Is this action or operation necessary?
- ◆ How can I do it faster and cheaper?
- ◆ How can I improve my accuracy?
- ◆ How can I build trust and confidence in my customer?

Step 5: Determine Needed Changes

Begin brainstorming solutions to any problems you identified in Step 4. If you have not already involved those who have to implement the changes, you should do so now. People support what they help create. You will probably not want to implement all your solutions, because some will not be as effective as others and some will be more difficult to implement. Solutions that have power and are easy to implement should be addressed first. More difficult solutions will take longer.

If you're serious about improving your customer service system, you'll need to develop an action plan.

Step 6: Develop an Action Plan

If you're serious about improving your customer service system, you'll need to develop an action plan. Action plans must answer the following questions:

- ◆ What needs to be done?
- ◆ When will it be done?
- ◆ Who is doing it?
- ◆ Who else needs to be involved?
- ◆ What are the limitations or restrictions on what can be done?
- ◆ Who will follow up to make sure the actions are completed?

Step 7: Follow Up

In order for your action plan to succeed, someone must follow up to ensure that the actions are completed. In addition, someone must make sure that the actions taken are producing the desired changes in customer service. Sometimes this is referred to as *providing accountability*.

Following the seven steps of the Continuous Improvement Process will allow you to identify and correct those weaknesses that are keeping your customer service system from being truly outstanding. However, the process does take patience.

After implementing corrective actions in your customer service areas, don't expect a sudden significant improvement in your customer surveys. It takes time for the customer to be impacted

by the changes. Customers need to have several encounters with the improved service before you make an impression on them. It is only then that customers will reflect the changes on your customer service surveys.

Putting Your Learning to Work

In the course of this book, we've seen how you can improve your own customer service skills and how you can help your organization improve its customer service system. Only one step remains: putting your knowledge into action. If you are truly serious about improving your customer service, you will need an action plan. Following is an Action Planning Form. Make several copies of it. You will use two copies of it as you complete this chapter, and you may want to use more later.

Step 1: External Customer Service

Review each page of this book, paying particular attention to the exercises you were asked to complete. Using one copy of the Action Planning Form, complete the form and develop the action steps you will take to improve your external customer service. Be specific when defining actions, and make sure they are feasible.

Step 2: Internal Customer Service

You can't have outstanding external customer service without outstanding internal customer service. While this book was not specifically written for internal customer service, all the same principles and techniques apply. With that in mind, review the book again. This time think about the material in terms of internal customer service. Using a second copy of the Action Planning Form, complete the form and develop the action steps you will take to improve your internal customer service.

Action Planning Form

What are the objectives of this action plan?

What are the desired customer service behaviors you would like to implement?

How will they benefit the customer?

What are the potential barriers to implementing the action plan?

How will you overcome these barriers?

Who else must be involved to make this action plan a success?

continued on next page





Action Planning Form *(continued)*

What are the action steps you will take?

	Start date	Finish date
1. _____	_____	_____
2. _____	_____	_____
3. _____	_____	_____
4. _____	_____	_____
5. _____	_____	_____
6. _____	_____	_____
7. _____	_____	_____
8. _____	_____	_____
9. _____	_____	_____
10. _____	_____	_____

How will you reward yourself after you complete your action plan?

Follow Up

Did the actions accomplish their objectives?

Yes No

Chapter Summary

Outstanding customer service is more than a collection of skills and techniques. It is a system that involves every part of your organization. As a customer service professional, you are responsible for continually trying to improve your organization's customer service system. You can do this by conducting a customer service audit of individual departments within your organization or by reviewing your entire customer service system.

Customer feedback is an important part of any review. You can gather feedback informally through your conversations with your customers, or you can design your own survey or focus group questions. If you are planning major changes in your organization, you should hire an expert to conduct a formal survey so that you gather the most reliable information possible.

To put everything you've learned into practice, you will need to develop an action plan. Following through on this plan will help you provide your external and internal customers with the type of outstanding customer service that builds loyalty and encourages repeat business.



Self-Check: Chapter Five Review

Answers to these questions appear on pages 102 and 103.

1. All customer encounters take place within a _____.
2. True or False?
When conducting a customer service audit, you should ask general questions that will help you look at broad issues.
3. True or False?
Customer service is not a system that can be improved.
4. What are the steps in the customer service Continuous Improvement Process?
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____
 - d. _____
 - e. _____
 - f. _____
 - g. _____
5. List three questions you can ask your customers when you are informally seeking feedback.
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____

Notes

SAMPLE

Answers to Chapter Reviews

Chapter One (page 29)

1. *External customers* are those who derive benefit from your products or services.
2. *Internal customers* are those who receive your personal work output.
3. False—Since every aspect of a company can impact the external customer, any slipup reflects on the customer's opinion of the company as a whole.
4. Perceived Value consists of the quality of our product or service, the customer service we provide in delivering that product or service, and the cost. PV is how customers measure the value of our company. High perceived value produces a loyal customer.
5. An *attitude* is the way we feel about something. Our behavior reflects our attitude. If we have a positive attitude, it is reflected in our behaviors, and customers see it. Customers also see our negative attitude. We cannot hide our attitude—positive or negative.
6. Customer service standards define acceptable customer service behaviors and let everyone know what is expected.
7. True—The customer expects you to know something about the product and/or service your company offers. They may ask you the difference between your product or service and your competitors.

Chapter Two (page 47)

1. The goal of communication is to transfer understanding between two or more people.
2. *Reflecting* is communicating back to a person your understanding of what he or she is saying.
3. False—Our body language and our tone of voice communicate most of the message.
4. 55 percent
5. When we communicate over the phone, we lose the message delivered by our body language. This accounts for about 38 percent of the message.
6. False—There are four basic communication styles. Customers communicate differently based on the style they prefer.

Chapter Three (page 71)

1. You value their business.
2. True—Customer behavior is determined most often by immediate, certain, and positive outcomes. If they anticipate an outcome that is immediate, certain, and positive, they will behave in a manner that results in that favorable outcome.
3. Provide more than a yes-or-no answer.
4.
 - a. Define the problems in specific terms.
 - b. List alternative solutions and focus on what you can do to correct the problem.
 - c. Pick a solution that best fits the desire of the customer.
 - d. Implement the solution and follow up to make sure it was implemented.
 - e. Make sure the problem is solved to the customer's satisfaction.

● Answers to Chapter Reviews

5. a. Getting customers to the right person. b. Being sure their expectations are met.
b. Being sure their expectations are met.
6. True.

Chapter Four (page 85)

1. 95 percent
2. a. How much we want our way.
b. How much we want to cooperate.
3. False—We have different conflict styles that sometimes get in the way of resolving conflict.
4. False—Most of our upset customers want to be helpful. If they are listened to, they can become loyal customers.
5. True—When we put ourselves in the customer's shoes for a while, it lets the customer know that you care. It will also help you reach a better solution to the problem.
6. Taking a few minutes to remove yourself from a stressful situation to regain your composure and relax.

Chapter Five (page 98)

1. All customer encounters take place within a customer service system.
2. False—You should ask specific questions that help you focus on specific behaviors.
3. False—Customer service is a system. Since a system has specific and defined steps, these steps can be improved.

4.
 - a. Determine the customer's expectations of service.
 - b. Make a list of all the steps your customer must take and the flow of information.
 - c. Go into detail about what is being done.
 - d. Evaluate each step or action to determine what is and is not adding value.
 - e. Determine needed changes.
 - f. Develop an action plan.
 - g. Follow up to make sure the actions accomplished what they were supposed to accomplish.

5.
 - a. What do you like best about our product/service?
 - b. In what ways could we improve our product/service?
 - c. How do our products/services compare to our competitors'?

SAMPLE