

Customer Service

What is customer service?

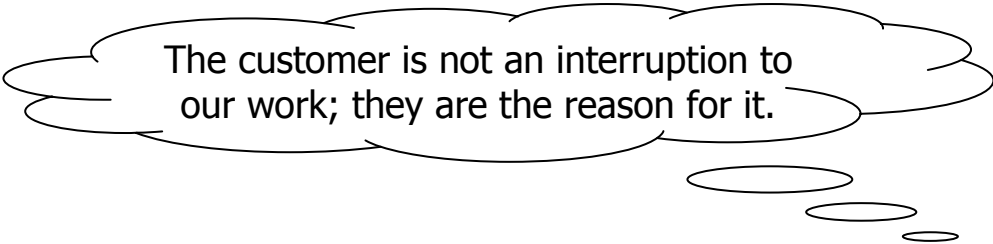
Customer service exists only in the mind of the customer – their perception is reality to them. If they are not satisfied with the service they received, then that service was not good enough. To the customer, it doesn't matter what you said or did, or how hard you tried, only whether you succeeded in meeting or exceeding their expectations.

Why 'exceeding' their expectations? We often specify the minimum acceptable level of service (often documented as a 'Service Level Agreement' or SLA). Our customers will soon get used to this – after all, if you get what you expect, it's no big deal. It is not sufficient to meet our customers' basic needs, we need to work out how to exceed their expectations with really great service.

This of course is an ascending spiral, as sooner or later they will get used to having their expectations exceeded, and this in turn becomes an expectation that you need to exceed. The benefit of this is that it can drive levels of service constantly upwards, whether to our external customers (who buy our products and services) or elsewhere within the business to internal customers.

We are usually competing with numerous competitors to get our customers to buy from us, and whilst our customers are buying on behalf of their business, they will apply the same buying criteria that we do when we buy things for ourselves or our homes. We have all been customers, in shops, hotels, garages, restaurants, and are quick to identify the level of service offered, and the effect it had on us.

It has been suggested that it costs around a thousand pounds to attract each new customer to a business, but we often don't spend a hundredth of that on keeping the ones we have. We need to develop and maintain this repeat business, and great customer service is the certain way to do so.

A large, irregular thought bubble with a tail pointing towards the bottom right. Inside the bubble, the text reads: "The customer is not an interruption to our work; they are the reason for it." Below the main bubble are three smaller, empty thought bubbles of decreasing size, also pointing towards the bottom right.

The customer is not an interruption to our work; they are the reason for it.

What's in it for me?

Good customer service will increase:

- Sales or Turnover, by attracting and retaining customers
- Margin, by making sure the product really matches their requirements, and making sure they have all they need. Selling solutions is good service!
- Job security, by improving the financial viability of the business
- Career opportunities, by enhancing your own reputation

What do customers really want?

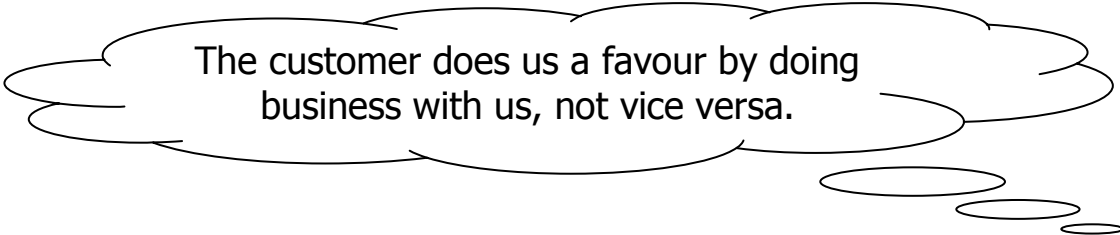
Ask them! You will never know just by looking at a customer what they want. You need to speak to them, ask questions, summarise what you hear, and most importantly be prepared to accept that they may not want what you thought they wanted. If you work in a (external) customer-facing role this is important, but it is equally as important in a support role where your customers will be internal ones (people or departments who rely on you and your team to provide a service to them).

For example:

Contrary to popular belief, not all customers want the best possible price above all else.

Not all customers want information now – some may be happy to wait so long as the information is accurate, while others may prefer an approximate answer now.

Don't forget the power of tone and body language when finding out needs – 93% of communication is through these means. Use this to empathise with their point of view.



The customer does us a favour by doing business with us, not vice versa.

Complaints

A satisfied customer may tell a few friends or colleagues, whereas an unhappy customer will certainly tell many more. Every complaint is an opportunity to exceed expectations – we should be thanking the customer for bothering to come back and tell us about the problem, rather than just never doing business with us again. Remember that they may have had to get themselves wound up to tell us about the problem. You should also accept personally the need to find an acceptable solution, as the customer won't want to hear that it was someone else's fault. To them, you represent Konica Minolta, so they expect you to fix it.

Remember also that you will need to deal with the emotions before you can get at, and start to work on, the facts. It is at the point of handling the emotion that you can make the greatest win, by empathising with the customer and acknowledging their emotion. Any anger expressed is rarely directed at a specific person – in the customer's eyes the company is at fault, not the individual. However, if you can provide great service in sorting out the complaint, it's you, the person, they will remember. A customer with a complaint that has been rectified will be a far better ambassador for us than someone who received merely average service.

What do I need to do?

You will need excellent personal skills, patience, and a sound understanding of our products and processes (in the case of external customers) or good knowledge of your own department's needs and capabilities (in the case of internal customers).

You will also – and most important – need the right attitude, a genuine desire to help. The attitude is estimated to be 80% of excellent customer service, skill is only 20%. Amongst other things, make sure you:

- Under-promise and over-deliver – give the customer a WOW!
- Emphasise the positive by telling the customer what you can do to help them, rather than what you can't.
- If you think you can't do something, and it makes the difference between giving good service or not, check with your manager – they may be able to make an exception.
- Stop whatever other tasks you are doing to attend to the customer, and give them your full attention.
- Keep promises you make such as to call a customer back at a particular time.

It is not necessarily the right approach to treat a customer as you would like to be treated. Instead, find out how they would like to be treated, and use that knowledge to deliver excellent service.

Get it right first time, every time. Not only does this give great service to the customer, it saves you unnecessary aggravation later.

Customer service is about getting all the little things right as well as the big picture – one small detail can let a department or team down just as badly as not bothering at all. You never get a second chance to make a first impression.

Finally, this can only be a brief discussion of customer service. Take all the opportunities offered for training and check out the various other resources available in the Top Tips, and most importantly, put them into practice!

For related topics see Top Tips:

- **Communication**
- **Rapport**