



Good Customer Service in the Workplace

Mark this down: A satisfied customer that receives quality service and care from a given supplier or provider will refer other friends and family to that company. As a result, there is, in most cases, a higher retention rate and loyalty from that customer and, consequently, increased revenue for the company. You've heard it said, "Happy wife, happy life." Well, in this case: "Happy customers, happy company!"

"Profitability, market share, and other measures of success increase, thanks to satisfied and loyal customers. Successful businesses have more resources to reinvest in the organization, which leads to greater employee satisfaction and retention." (Paul Bernthal, Ph.D, and James H.S. David, Development Dimensions International).

Of course it makes sense that satisfied employees who love where they work would reflect that in the way they treat customers, clients, and patients.

On a personal note, I'll go to a restaurant where the ambiance is average and the food is good, if I'm treated well and the server is skillfully friendly, over a 5-star establishment that acts snooty and bothered, no matter what their rating is!

An acquaintance told me the other day that, although he preferred a certain make of SUV with a slightly higher rating over another SUV, the sincerity and helpfulness of a salesman at another dealership won him over with his customer service skills in spite of the slightly lower rating.

How many times have you heard a statement like, "They treat us very well, they are people of integrity, and their work is excellent, so the cost doesn't matter as much, I wouldn't go anywhere else"?

Customers over and over again are so pleased with the value and quality of service that they choose a company over its competitors.



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To me, it's a no-brainer that those who desire you as a customer in their place of business should break their back with hospitality and friendliness, since your business is, ultimately, the very bread and butter of the company's success!



First Impressions Rank High

There has been a lot of research done with a variety of organizations regarding their frontline staff referred to as the “service encounter.” These are the ones who are first to meet and greet the client/customer. The findings suggest that the tone that is set with the initial contact determines where the rest of the experience goes from that point on.

I've also read, however, that frontline employees are frequently not trained adequately or empowered to meet customer needs and ensure effective service. Thus the experience for the customer is less than satisfactory.

Ideally, those making the first impressions for an organization have planned and prepared with a rehearsed set of behaviors that leave a good impression resulting in the customer's positive perception of the rest of the organization.

I returned an item to a home improvement store's customer service counter this morning, and, although it was only 6:45 a.m. (and I was not offered coffee or doughnuts), I was hoping for a nice greeting and assistance by an employee who was friendly and awake!

I once walked into a clinic with an appointment at 9:00 a.m. and 5 employees were at their cubicles and desk in the same area. To my shock, not one of them greeted me, much less even looked up at me until I said, “Good morning.”

In comparison, whether it is a clinic, tire shop, dealership, or front counter at a coffee shop, when people are greeted politely and professionally, the stage is set for future business or, at a minimum, a good experience.

In addition, there are a few taboos and cautions that you might want to highlight when it comes to customer service at your office:

Common Taboos

- Not looking up when someone enters the office or saying, “We'll be right with you.”
- Taking a phone call and tending the caller's needs ahead of other customers who have been waiting.
- Saying something inappropriate or gossiping about another employee, customer, or management in front of or within earshot of the customers.
- Blaming another department or individual for a delay or mistake.
- Being rude to a customer even if they have been rude first.
- Not returning a phone call to the customer when stated that you would.
- Eating in front of the customer while working.
- Not taking responsibility for a mistake made or looking into it.
- Not putting your cell phone down or making eye contact.

I've often been amazed at the ability and patience of those who have encountered unreasonable or irate customers. Frequently I have thought I'm not sure I could respond with such grace and professionalism.

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Below are some ideas for managing those sensitive encounters:

Managing Angry and Frustrated Customers

- Validate their frustrations and apologize where appropriate.
- If it gets really out of hand, pull the customer off to the side and ask for assistance.
- Let them know they have identified a problem and thank them for it.
- Tell them you want to help them fix the problem and will find an answer for them.
- Stay calm and don't get hooked in emotionally. There is a proverb that states: "A soft answer turns away wrath."
- Relate to them about a situation you experienced that was similar. I was frustrated with a satellite company because my rates kept going up in spite of their previous promises. The employee on the other end of the line assured me that although she works for that same company it also happened to her and things ironed out once they were alerted.
- Avoid defensiveness
- Be open to the possibility that a mistake has been made. A good friend of mine works at Starbucks and they have been trained that if a customer doesn't like their drink, to simply apologize and make another one. Don't say, "What's wrong with it?" or, "It's not my fault," or, "Nothing satisfies you!"
- Research proves that it isn't actually the mistake that stops a customer from returning, but how the mistake is handled or not that determines their return.

A study by Technical Assistance Research Programs (TARP, 1994) revealed that many consumers who experience problems with service do not complain. For small ticket products, this number is as high as 96 percent. Of these individuals, a large number

choose not to buy again. And even though they might not complain to the organization, dissatisfied customers often tell 10 to 16 other people about their experience.

So what seems to be the key characteristics customers are looking for and hoping to experience with any organization? What retains them as a customer and keeps them loyal for years?



Top Customer Satisfaction Builders

1. Listen carefully to what the customers have to say (ask questions if need be to gather specifics).
2. Always interact with customers in a warm, friendly way.
3. Take immediate action to meet the customer's need or request.
4. Admit when a mistake has been made and apologize when necessary.

Obviously, the opposite would be true regarding bad customer service:

1. Interact with customers in a cold and aloof way.
2. Fail to follow through on promises or commitments.
3. Do not listen carefully to what the customers have to say or minimize their concerns.
4. Blame the customer for any and all mistakes or miscommunications.

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Comedian Brian Regan has a clip about checking in to a Hotel that can't find his reservation. Instead of taking ownership, they asked if he would have checked in using another name. His response is hilarious (YouTube Brian Regan, Hotel Reservations).

So how can an organization reinforce the service culture and empower staff to put the needs of the customer at a higher level?

Suggestions and Ideas to Improve Customer Service

- First and most importantly, top management has to buy into the service culture model and invest whatever it takes to retain loyal customers who then will do the work for them by word-of-mouth marketing.
- Put a system in place to collect feedback from customers about their experience.
- Have ongoing training to develop these skills to accomplish three things:
 - Manage customer interaction.
 - Turn dissatisfied customers into satisfied, loyal customers.
 - Improve processes again and again.

When I've personally experienced excellent service, I've asked about their training and the answer has consistently been, "We have training frequently."

So for high customer service ratings, a loyal customer base, a trained and empowered staff, and increased benefits and revenue, there is no loss in the win-win approach!



Bill Gallagher has been counseling and working with professionals since 1980. His emphasis in the workplace is to help develop both relational skills and professional standards among administration and staff. He has worked in multiple organizational settings and of recent has spent most of his time addressing workplace issues in healthcare and city government.

Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture's needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill's strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.