



7 Tips for Outstanding Customer Service

Learning Guide

The Right Way to Think about Customer Service

The way a company thinks about its customer service function reveals a great deal. There are those that see it almost as a necessary evil: something they know is expected of them, but that they'd rather not provide if they didn't have to.

Other organizations see it differently. To them, customer service is a way to connect more personally with their customers, build trust, and strengthen relationships that will help them maximize the value they can deliver over time, as well as the lifetime value of the customer to their bottom line.

A recent study by Dale Carnegie & Associates exploring high-performing corporate cultures confirmed the importance of having a strong customer focus. The research identified a subset of particularly successful companies and examined how their attitudes and actions differed from the rest. One of the ways in which senior leaders at these winning organizations thought differently from those in other companies was their strong emphasis on the customer.

Many employees have contact with customers, whether or not they are in a role that's officially designated as dealing with customer service. Sales, service, support, quality, product delivery, management and others all may have an element of customer service involved in their work.

Outstanding service providers cultivate relationships throughout the customer experience, whether online, by phone or face-to-face. A few intentional steps, followed every time, can help turn good service into great service that fosters long-term, trusted relationships with customers and yields tremendous benefits.

Great customer service begins with the right attitude and ends with tangible benefits to the organization delivering it. It's worth doing well. In this learning guide, we share some of the advantages of approaching the customer service function as an opportunity to build relationships with customers, as well as some tips for how to do it well, and some important considerations.

1. Understand the “Why”

Every interaction with a customer is a chance to enhance the bottom line.

To motivate yourself – and others – to provide consistently outstanding customer service throughout the customer’s experience with your organization, it helps to understand the reasons it’s so important.

Customer service gives you the opportunity for a two-way dialogue that reveals what customers really want. This dialogue is also a chance to build trust. That’s important because Dale Carnegie & Associates’ research shows that customers who feel they can trust a company’s representative are three times more likely to forgive a single bad experience than those who don’t have that trust. Since the majority of dissatisfied customers don’t even contact customer service about their issue, that’s a valuable “free pass” to have.

At the same time, clients who trust the representatives of the company they buy from are more likely than others to take the time to share a concern or complaint, which provides an opportunity to recover them before they are lost to the competition. Small increases in retention rates can translate into significant increases in profit, especially in businesses where customer acquisition costs are high.

The bottom line can also get a boost from the customer service function when representatives are trained to listen for unmet needs that can translate into cross-selling opportunities. Finally, empowering customer service representatives to offer excellent service to clients has a positive impact on their engagement by making their work more meaningful and transforming it into something they can take pride in, which creates an upward spiral of outstanding performance and motivation that enables companies to excel.

2. Begin with the Right Attitude

Outstanding service starts with a positive attitude.

Admittedly, developing and maintaining the right attitude in the customer service function can sometimes be a challenge.

Start by ensuring you're thinking the right way about customer complaints. First, complaints are a normal part of running a business. No organization is perfect, so mistakes will occur that need to be resolved. Second, complaints provide an opportunity to demonstrate your customer orientation, which can help you stand out from your competition.

Next, consider your own role. Don't take complaints personally. They aren't about you. It's important to separate the complaint from ourselves. Typically, we aren't the source of the problem, we are simply the person who will help solve it. The criticism you may hear from customers isn't meant for you, so don't internalize it. Finally, think about your attitude toward the customer. Customers evaluate our attempts to resolve their issues in two ways: whether we provide an acceptable solution, and how we make them feel while we are doing it.

We know from research that customers want to be treated with care and empathy – to feel you have a genuine interest in them, understand their issue and are helping them. That mindset and the resulting behaviors are very important for building trust. Customers also want to be listened to and feel respected. These are the emotional aspects of customer complaints that we must also address.

Customer service is highly people-focused work, so a good place to start is with the time-tested principles to becoming a friendlier person.

From “How to Win Friends and Influence People”

1. Don't criticize, condemn or complain.
2. Give honest, sincere appreciation.
3. Arouse in the other person an eager want.
4. Become genuinely interested in other people.
5. Smile.
6. Remember that a person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language.
7. Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves.
8. Talk in terms of the other person's interests.
9. Make the other person feel important—and do it sincerely.

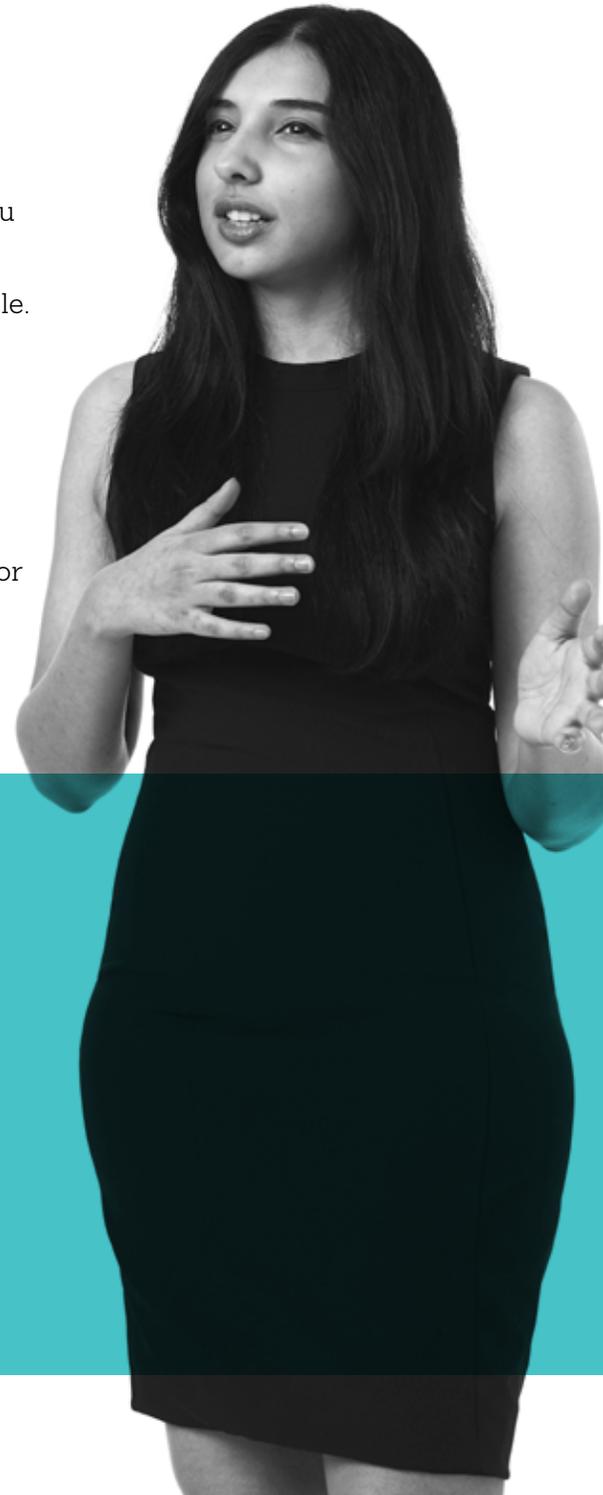
3. Model Courtesy

“There’s always time for courtesy.”

– Dale Carnegie

Every professional exchange between two people should begin and end with courtesy, whether via the telephone, live chat, email or another channel. Taking a few seconds to be courteous sets a positive tone for the conversation to follow. Here are some important tips:

- Smile – even if you’re on the phone or typing!
- Give your full name.
- Use the customer’s name – and make sure you have it right.
- Be conversational and embrace your personality – it’s an advantage you have over chat bots.
- Use the customer’s preferred communication method whenever possible.
- Allow the person time to think and speak but fill the silence when appropriate.
- Speak at the same rate as the other person
- Pause between ideas for clarity.
- Ask permission before using speaker phone, putting someone on hold or when there will be any delay in your response.
- Always end the conversation by thanking the customer again for contacting you.



4. Develop a Complaint Resolution Process

Having a process helps ensure consistency.

It helps to have a process for resolving customer complaints. At the same time, it's also advisable to provide those working to resolve them with some flexibility. Establish the hard boundaries and give customer service professionals the autonomy to understand what it will take to satisfy each customer and to work within the boundaries to meet each customer's needs. When it comes to the conversation itself, having a process helps, too. Here's one that works well as a guide:

1. Greet

Begin in a friendly way. Always greet people (in any communication channel) as though you are happy to hear from them. This is easy to say but can be harder to do: it requires focusing on the present and separating any previous negative experiences from the customer contact in which you're involved right now.

2. Listen

We often get the same complaints again and again, making it challenging to really listen to people. Give every customer an opportunity to vent some of their frustration. Show respect for their point of view, even if you don't agree with the complaint. Resist the temptation to start responding too quickly. Instead, begin to ask clarifying questions and actively listen for both the facts and the feelings involved.

3. Take ownership of the problem

Once the customer has given an initial explanation, take the opportunity to reassure them you're on their side. Let them know you'll do everything you can to help resolve their issue. This is an important step to help reduce customer frustration and set (or reset) the tone for the rest of the interaction. You're not promising it will be resolved, only that you'll do your very best. That's a promise you can keep every time.

4. Ask more questions

If you haven't already fully understood the concern, ask more questions. Now that they've vented their initial frustration and been reassured you're on their side, they may have more information to provide. Again, resist responding with a solution until you truly understand the person's issue.

- a. Elementary questions capture the basic facts surrounding the problem.
- b. Elaborative questions gather more details, giving the customer a chance to expand on their issue and feelings.
- c. Evaluative questions help us gain an understanding of the severity of the issue from the customer's perspective and what it will take to satisfy them.

5. Empathize

Find points of agreement with the customer. This does not necessarily mean that you agree with the complaint in its entirety. This is where we show the customer that we've heard and understood their concern, and we recognize that it is important to them. Be empathetic. If the situation were reversed, you might feel the same way.

6. Address the issue

Now that you've taken steps to address the emotional side of the problem, it's time to do everything you can to resolve the practical aspects of the complaint. When appropriate, take responsibility for the actions of your organization. Apologize. While you'll obviously need to adhere to them, avoid citing corporate guidelines or policies. Offer a solution that feels personalized to the person's problem. Make the resolution seem as easy as possible. This is your opportunity to turn a lemon into lemonade; research shows that customers who have their problems successfully resolved are more likely to continue to do business with you.

7. Use test questions

Ask questions to test how well you have resolved the complaint. Give the customer another opportunity to talk and listen closely to what they say to determine if they are truly satisfied.

8. Offer additional help

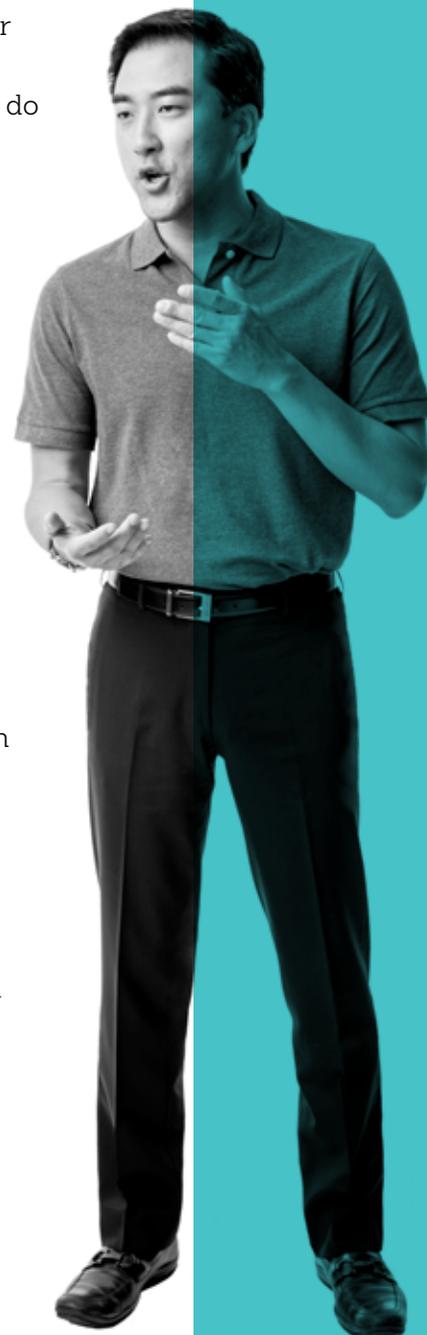
Ask what else you can do for the customer. This turns the conversation away from the complaint, making it easier to end on a positive note.

9. Follow through

Often, complaints cannot be resolved completely during the first contact. If you need to get back to the customer, set the right expectations for the timeframe in which you will follow-up. Confirm their preferred method of contact, and make sure to follow-up before you said you would. Even if the complaint has been resolved, it can be useful to create a reason to contact the customer again. For example, find a way to provide added value based on something you heard during the conversation.

10. Become a customer advocate

The knowledge you accumulate in your role serving customers can be very valuable to your organization. Look for ways to help solve the root causes of problems by becoming a customer advocate. Make connections with colleagues in other departments and take time to exchange insights that can lead to improving the overall customer experience.



“First ask yourself: What is the worst that can happen? Then prepare to accept it. Then proceed to improve on the worst.” – Dale Carnegie

No process works every time. Occasionally, everyone who serves in a customer service function will find themselves dealing with customers who are not just dissatisfied, but who are really angry – and you’ll want to be ready for it. Organizations with great customer service practice for these situations. Here are some tips:

- Stay calm and remain polite. Getting angry will only make the customer angrier.
- Try to see things from the caller’s point of view. Perhaps you would feel as upset as they are, given the same situation.
- Thank the person for raising the concern and do it sincerely. They are giving you a chance to retain them. Focus on the importance of satisfied customers to you and your organization.
- Immediately show a willingness to resolve the problem or conflict. Let them know you will do your best to help.
- Really listen. Sometimes the irate caller just wants someone to listen to their story, even if you are unable to resolve it completely.
- Depending on the options available to you, offer to have your supervisor talk to the caller. Your supervisor may do and say the same things as you, but sometimes hearing it from someone else has a positive effect on the customer.

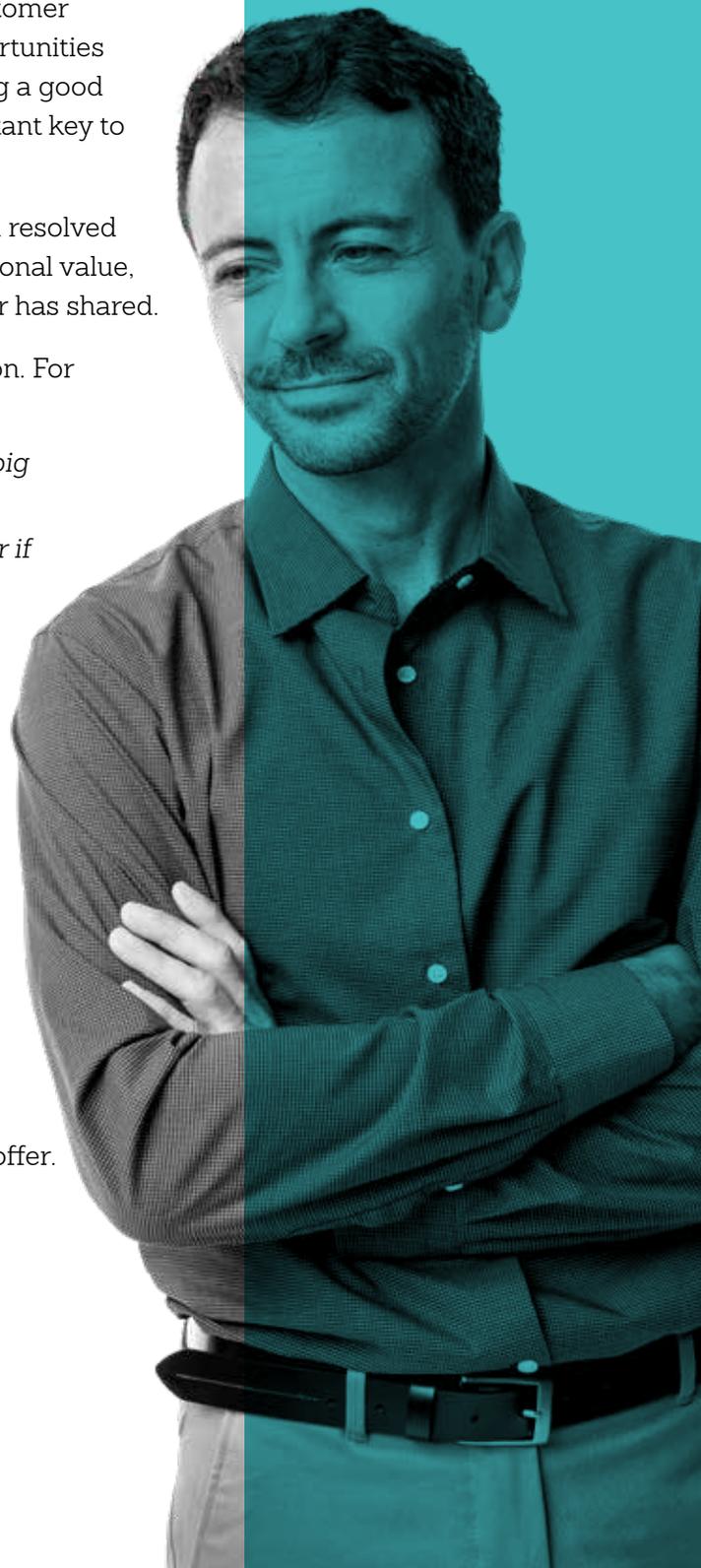
6. Make Adding Value a Customer Service Goal

Every touchpoint with the customer is an opportunity to learn more ways to help.

The customer knowledge captured during interactions with customer service representatives can be useful for identifying future opportunities to provide value and sell additional products or services. Having a good Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system is an important key to making the most of that information.

Upselling should never occur until the initial complaint has been resolved to the customer's complete satisfaction. Once that's done, additional value, products or services can be offered, based on what the customer has shared.

1. Reference the potential need you noted from the conversation. For example:
 - *"Based on what you said before, it sounds like you have a big project going on. Are you in need of..."*
 - *"I heard you say earlier how important it is that [...] I wonder if it would be useful to you to consider..."*
2. Open the door to get favorable attention and help open the customer's mind to options. For example:
 - *"Some of our customers appreciate ..."*
 - *"Did you know about the benefits of ..."*
 - *"You might be able to save some time by ..."*
 - *"Here is a way that you could save some money ..."*
 - *"Would you like to reduce some potential frustration later by..."*
3. Present the offer. Tell the customer what you're offering, the specific benefit they can receive and any additional cost, if applicable.
4. Use a test question to see how the customer feels about the offer. For example:
 - *"What do you think?"*
 - *"Is that worth considering?"*



7. Ask for Referrals When You've Earned It

Many satisfied customers are happy to give a referral – IF you ask.

You can tell when you've truly exceeded a customer's expectations. When that happens, it's a good time to ask for a referral. Referrals are very valuable:

- Don't underestimate the power of a satisfied buyer's good will or influence.
- People who are referred are more likely to buy.
- Think of your buyers as partners who can refer you to a steady stream of new business.

But how do we ask for a referral without feeling or sounding pushy or aggressive? Having a simple, conversational process can help. The important thing is to remember the benefits of asking, and just ask!

Step 1: Remind the customer of the specific benefits they've enjoyed by working with you.

This should be easy: paraphrase what it is they've told you that made it clear that your product or service has exceeded their expectations. Confirm you've understood correctly, in a conversational way.

Step 2: Describe your customer profile.

Briefly describe the range of challenges faced and benefits received by your customers overall. This may remind your existing customer of other needs they have themselves. It will also help them start to think of potential prospects for you.

Step 3: Identify a benefit for giving a referral.

How could your current customer (or anyone) benefit from referring this person to you? Identify the value it creates for this person – not their company, the prospect, or you. Try honestly to see things from their point of view.

Step 4: Suggest they already know someone.

Provide examples of people or job positions who could benefit from your offerings. Make it easy for them. If you have a specific person or people in mind, mention them by name. Give a variety of names and positions and speak slowly so the person has a chance to think.

Step 5: Ask for an introduction.

Ask your contact if he or she is willing to give you an introduction before you contact the new person. It could be as simple as sending a quick text or email, or perhaps they would be willing to mention it the next time they talk to them. If appropriate, you could suggest they introduce you personally at a networking event, or even set up a conference call. In any case, suggest they let you know when it's done so you can be sure to follow-up promptly. Commit to reporting back on how it goes – after all, they have a vested interest in it.

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