

Customer Service

What is Customer Service?

Building a better business is about providing effective customer service; customer service which provides satisfaction.

Why is there so much stress placed on Customer Service today?

The nature of our market has changed over the last 20 years, and continues to change. We have significantly more competition in our marketplace, including web-based stores, which has given the customer more choice. So customers make their decisions based not only on price, quality and availability, but also the service they get.

How many times have you set up an appointment to have a serviceman come and fix a piece of household equipment? Think about the number of hours you've wasted waiting for that person to turn up!

By providing superior customer service in today's business environment, you are on the road to maintaining a healthy client base, as well as saving the business money. It is cheaper to keep a customer than to source new customers, think about it!

Customer Service is about (at least) meeting customer expectations

Until you have met those expectations customers will not feel satisfied with your customer service. Ideally you should be striving to exceed your customers' expectations. This will may your business stand out from your competitors. Satisfied clients may be motivated to return and buy the same products or services. They are also more likely to talk about their experiences with you.

Remember the customer who has a bad service experience will tell an average of 10 people. Word of mouth can ruin your reputation and your business.

Satisfied customers usually tell an average of five people of their good experiences. The most effective form of advertising is word of mouth. It costs nothing it gives personal experience, gives more detailed information and has a high credibility.

You should review your customer service strategies and plan to impress your clients.

Making Customer Service your key competitive advantage.

Perhaps the single most important factor in driving your company towards a competitive advantage is the vision with which you drive your company. It's the philosophy you develop for doing business.

An example of a vision might be:

When the phone was answered - did you feel welcome?

Find ways that you and your staff can look at your product from the customers' point of view.

When you're close to your customers you're on the way to a real competitive advantage.

Provide a quality service which results in customer satisfaction.

Emphasise to your staff the importance of providing a quality service, not just the minimum required to get by - not "she'll be right"! Make sure your company is able to provide:

Reliable Service.

Provide what is promised dependably and accurately. If you have a message to call a customer back - do it the same day.

Assurance.

Make sure you convey courtesy and have knowledge of your product. Customers must have confidence in you and be able to trust your word.

Attend to the Details.

Make sure you attend to the little details. Show that you care and that you are prepared to provide individual attention to every customer.

Appearance.

Take a look at your shop front or office from the point of view of a new customer. Is it tidy? Is it easy to find? Are the staff clean, tidy and appropriately dressed?

Respond to your customers' needs.

Show a willingness to help and provide prompt service - remember the fury you've felt when you've been waiting to be served and you can hear the assistant taking a personal phone call.

Ensure you and your staff know how to deliver customer service which will encourage repeat business.

To deliver effective customer service we need to communicate effectively. It's easy to switch off when someone is talking, but it's the communication, the understanding, questioning, explaining, and advising which often makes the difference between dealing with customers and giving customer satisfaction.



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Effective listening involves concentrating to understand the message, recognising the urgency, worry, excitement, confusion, exasperation, frustration, anticipation and relief. It means staying in neutral as we listen, not taking on the emotion, or the negative information personally.

Your questions are the way to find out your customer requirements and draw out of them the extra information you need to identify exactly what they want. Make sure that your frontline staff are trained to ask appropriate questions.

Recognise also your customers' non-verbal communication. Observe your customers' body movements, their eyes, these will tell you what needs they have - whether they need comfort, appreciation, assistance, speedy service or just a warm welcome.

Give feedback to your customers - this will show them that you understand their needs.

Make sure you give clear explanations and take care to think from your customers' perspective, use precise language, organise your explanations logically, and give examples to explain your points. Encourage them to ask questions as you explain, and recap on the main points. The cost of losing a customer and gaining a new one makes it vital to encourage existing customers to return for more business.

Making a special effort to get feedback from customers is an essential part of customer service.

Feedback will be most effective when:

- We hear both good and bad news;
- We regularly obtain feedback;
- It is focussed on what really matters to the customer.

We can receive feedback from:

- Conversations with customers;
- Evaluation forms asking customers for rating on specific aspects of service;
- Sending follow-up letters and arranging interviews with former clients;
- Keeping a list of all complaints and reviewing it regularly to discover causes of dissatisfaction.

Customer service is about building satisfactory perceptions of your service.

Your customers will be donating their own time to give you feedback. Give them the courtesy of listening and responding to their comments and suggestions.

Further hints for developing customer loyalty:

- Keep your service personal;
- Use your customer's name;
- Recall snippets they may have told you about their business and enquire about their success.

Keep in touch with your customers:

- Call customers to check on their level of satisfaction with your service;
- Telephone customers to report on progress;
- Send newsletters;
- Send notices of forthcoming events or extended services;
- Send thank you notes or cards.

Know your Clients' Needs

Your business is in existence primarily due to your clients. Therefore it is important that you understand their needs.

You may start to learn more about your clients by:

- Regularly asking your clients about the services of your business.
- Providing feedback forms for your clients to complete.
- Phoning or visiting your clients after the initial sale and asking if your product or service has met their needs.
- Welcoming any client complaints and managing these complaints to avoid negative word-of-mouth.
- Keeping a list of client complaints to identify any patterns and the cause of dissatisfaction.
- Learning what your competitors are doing and why their clients are satisfied.
- Remember that everyone in your business needs to understand your clients.



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A loyal customer means repeat business

Repeat business means a better business and a better business can be achieved through effective customer service. Remember again, it's more cost-effective to keep an existing customer than to have to continue advertising to look for new customers to replace the old.

Business Enterprise Centre staff are always available to talk over business management issues. Call the BEC to set up a confidential interview with an experienced business counsellor.

Contact the: **THE HUB** on
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