

Customer Service for Call Centers

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In 1876, Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, providing a way to quickly communicate with another person without needing to be physically present. Today, according to CBSNews.com, there are twenty-four billion telemarketing calls made each year nationally, resulting in \$661 billion in sales. Furthermore, according to a recent *USA Today* article by Paul Davidson, the number of people employed by call centers throughout the United States is estimated to be close to 6.5 million. Call centers function in almost every industry, providing an extremely cost-effective way for conducting business. The telephone saves time and money for both customers and businesses. With all this business taking place, one big complaint can be heard again and again—the lack of customer service in the call center environment.

Our focus here is customer service from a call center perspective. We believe that while call centers are potentially the perfect environment for role-model customer service, this is usually not the case. A call center, in one form or another, represents a business that provides or is willing to provide a service. Even if the actual work is outsourced, the call center is acting on behalf of a business and therefore acting as its agent. The bottom line is that customers see the call center as "The Business."

With the national Do Not Call Registry now in effect, building revenue on different fronts will become even more critical for businesses. In addition to identifying and exploiting up-selling and cross-selling opportunities through savvy analysis of a customer's current situation and questioning, companies will have to focus on how they service customers to keep them coming back. Most customers who take their business elsewhere do so because a company fails to provide something that's very important—good service. Super service is part of filling this income gap.

Looking at the different kinds of call centers, we see that they generally fall into two major categories: inbound and outbound. A call center's audience may be either other businesses (business to business) or consumers (business to consumer). Call centers facilitate a number of activities including: sales, customer service, support, technical assistance, order fulfillment, collections, data gathering, and satisfaction surveys just to name a few.

Having run an outbound business to business call center since 1991, we are intimately aware of a call center's link between each customer and The Business. Our customers are the businesses that engage us to make calls on their behalf. Yet indirectly the people in the business we call are also our customers as well. Beyond our own outbound center, we have experience working within an inbound support center in an information technology environment as well as an outbound telemarketing center for a large telecommunication company. As business owners and consumers ourselves, we are both prospects who receive calls and customers who place calls to purchase goods/services or obtain assistance.

We personally believe that a call center has the opportunity to not only provide service to a company but to create long-term, loyal customers. Customer service at its best ensures a pleasant, successful experience attracting a customer's return business; at its worst, it not only loses a customer but also ensures that the lost customer will share his unhappiness with others. This is not the kind of recognition or branding any business wants. (For our purposes in this chapter, the word "customer" will refer to both prospects and customers that call center staff speak with.)

Within a call center, you do not have the luxury of seeing your customer. In many ways, you are blinded by your inability to pick up on and directly respond to the visual cues a customer provides during any interaction. Without your eyes, you have only your ears, openness to the emotions of others and your questioning techniques to ascertain where a person is coming from. Using your critical thinking skills, with the information you gather, you can develop a meaningful connection with your customer.

Your connection starts with the first contact. You are about to begin a relationship. Your ability to build this relationship is based on the language you use, your tone of voice, pleasing personality and critical-thinking skills. Moving forward, you can build the rapport you need to meet the expectations of and solve the concerns of your customers.

The heart of outstanding customer service starts with what we call the Behavior Model, illustrated in Figure #1 below.

**[EDITOR'S NOTE - INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE. MM]

In examining the Behavior Model, we see that the outer circle is Knowledge. Knowledge is the sum of all of our experience, learning and education. We collect and store more knowledge than will ever be directly useful to us. In fact, the key is being able to access useful knowledge when we need it. High performers retain the useful knowledge they need at the ready, which keeps them at the top of their game.

The second circle is Skill. Skill is the ability to effectively and productively use the knowledge we have. Barriers to skill development include:

- * Lack of comfort with a new skill
- * The stress of change – status quo is always easier
- * Negative feedback

The third circle is Behavior. To effectively make a behavioral change, you have to practice and experience the change and be willing to push through any challenges or difficulties you might face. Success comes from successful behavior.

The Behavior Model comes to life regularly during any given work day, especially when dealing with an upset or demanding customer. You possess the knowledge, and you practiced the necessary skills. Now are you willing to exhibit the behavior that best fits the situation at hand?

In our call center, we use two methodologies to keep our customer service at the forefront of everything we do. First we use GO for BROKE which focuses on the behaviors an agent must exhibit in order to be successful. Secondly, we use Be a Customer CHAMPION. The simple truth is if you want your customers to keep coming back you must champion them.

All the same, none of what we discuss in this chapter would be of any value unless the principles of Valuing Customers and being a Customer Advocate were in place. Let's investigate what Valuing Customers and being a Customer Advocate is all about.

Valuing Customers

Customers are often called the lifeblood of an organization. The fact is that if it weren't for our customers, we wouldn't be here. Yet in working to do a good job, we can forget

the simple fact that our customers provide our paychecks.

Customers respond to us based on their experiences with us. Did they have quality experiences? Did we understand and meet their needs? Did we focus on partnering and building relationships? Did we put our customers at ease?

A valued customer will return because of his or her experience with us. The fact is that sixty-eight percent of customers stop doing business with a company because of poor service. Studies also show that ninety percent of customers who cease doing business with a company make no effort to tell the firm why. (American Management Association)

In valuing our customers, we are always looking for new ways to enhance our relationships, improve awareness of our customers' needs, and ensure good communication. Just as you can identify a false smile, your customer knows if you care about her business. In this regard, our values, the fundamental guidelines we live our lives by, do determine how the world perceives us.

Customer Advocate

Working in a call center ultimately means you are both customer advocate and a company representative. Whether handling an inbound or outbound call, you are interacting with a customer who may or may not be an expert in this arena. Your responsibility is to assist the customer by providing him with the best information available allowing him to make an informed decision. In this way, you can use your experience and knowledge to make every interaction a successful one. As discussed earlier, this means you must know your product/service as well as know where to obtain additional information as you need it.

An integral part of being a customer advocate is customer focus. The first step here is to know who your customer is. Sometimes this may be more complicated than it appears. There may be several customers, not just one. They may be internal or they may be external.

Through understanding who your customers are, you can then understand their point of view. One of the most important customer focus skills is empathy—simply put, being able to put yourself in your customer's shoes. An old saying states, "People don't care

how much you know until they know how much you care." Being able to see the situation through your customer's eyes will go a long way toward building a successful relationship between you and your customer. In this way, you identify solutions and solve problems through the unique perspective of the customer.

In everything you do, every choice you make, every action you take, the customer and the public see you as The Business. Your choices (how you handle yourself, your responses to others) will be pretty clear if you think of The Business as your company and always have in mind the way you would want others to see your company.

Remember that since you are The Business, you have the potential to bring new business in or to drive business away. All your actions should be positive, and your interactions with others should focus on a win-win outcome.

With the principles for Valuing Customers and being a Customer Advocate in place, it is time to explore the two methodologies for outstanding call center customer service. We will start with GO for BROKE which looks at individual behaviors you can develop to lead the field in customer service. Next we will delve into the Be a Customer CHAMPION methodology. Now, let's GO for BROKE.

GO for BROKE

With the Behavior Model in mind, let's look at what we need to do to provide excellent customer service. There are seven basic principles for excellent customer service in a call center. They are illustrated by the acrostic "GO for BROKE," a methodology taught in ADI Performance's **Prospecting for Sales Results** program. GO for BROKE requires more than just picking up a phone, getting a dial tone and dialing a number. GO for BROKE is the foundation for establishing successful habits, along with the ability to execute under all circumstances.

Many years ago, Professor Neil Smith shared with me a priceless piece of wisdom when he said, "It doesn't matter how hard you work unless you meet the standard." Working hard is not enough; you must also provide something of value. Many people work hard, yet they never slow down to determine how they can work better. At times, they get frustrated at the system yet do not apply themselves to excellence in what they do. GO for BROKE moves beyond working hard to working smart. Let's get started.

G - Get focused.

Being focused on what you are doing and when you are doing it is the first step to success. Focus is the one attribute that separates the few from the many. In a call center, agents must regularly deal with rejection and customer complaints. How you deal with these challenges will determine how successful you are. Beware of negative individuals. They will pull and drain your energy in an attempt to get you on their level, a level of anger, negativity, frustration, resentment and rejection. At this level, no one wins. You can take any negative situation and turn it into a win-win using the techniques outlined in the following pages. Keep any rejection you experience in perspective. Your focus is to represent the business in the best way possible. Staying focused on the positive outcomes you can achieve, delivers positive outcomes.

Another part of focus is proper planning. Decide ahead of time what the purpose of the call will be. What do you want to get out of this call? Establish a relationship? Make a sale? Generate add-on business? What information do you need in order to meet your goal? Choose questions and behaviors that support that purpose.

While you are creating a plan for the call, mentally prepare yourself. Mental preparation and the right attitude are key factors when making the distinction between success and failure. Bringing a fresh, rested mind, well-versed in your product or service and infused with enthusiasm for each call, increases your chances of success.

O - Opportunity is everywhere.

Look around. No matter what the economic climate is, no matter how much people complain, there is opportunity all around you. Business is still taking place, and success stories are everywhere. Unfortunately, people spend too much time listening to negative input, like the news, or associating with naysayers. Find the good news, spend time with success-minded people, and be persistent; opportunities will start appearing. When opportunities for you appear, what will you do? Will you be ready to take advantage of them? Will you go after them? If you do not invest the energy to go after and develop them, they will disappear, lost forever in the vast ocean of opportunities passed by.

Where opportunity is concerned, having a positive attitude is an intangible that can give you an edge. Maintaining a positive approach is energizing and keeps you ready for new challenges. It shows in your thoughts, words, emotions, expression and posture. With a good attitude, you are also in the perfect position to be open to new ideas, exposing yourself to all kinds of philosophies and people. Being knowledgeable on many subjects increases your versatility. Clearly, part of being positive is a willingness to change, persevere and help others. Employing tact, common courtesies, sincerity, tolerance, humor, hope and patience makes working with others, whether fellow employees or customers, pleasant and fulfilling.

B - Believe in yourself and your product or service.

When initially speaking with someone on the phone, remember that you are viewed as the product or service. You are the first contact with the customer. Imagine that all the customer knows about your company is based on what you say and how you come across. Goodwill is yours to build or destroy. Now that is power! Your confidence in yourself and your product or service will come through in the way you choose and deliver your words. If you have no faith in what you are doing, how can the customer? You have the potential to be the absolute best in your field; the question is, "Do you believe it?"

There are no secrets to self-confidence. Knowing your stuff develops self-confidence. When you dedicate yourself, your time and energy to learning and being proficient at what you do, self-confidence is a natural byproduct. Believing in your skills and talents, comes from mastering the basics and builds from there. However, if the fundamentals are not mastered, you will always be at a disadvantage. You will be unable to build if your foundation is not on a solid footing.

Product/service confidence comes from curiosity; a curiosity that drives you to know as much as you can about your company and its offerings. Understanding your connection with the customer and how to guide him or her through your own organization is important. You know you have the self-confidence you need when you pick up the phone and effectively handle an unpleasant and upset customer.

R - Review your communication habits.

What are your communication habits like? Do you speak clearly? Do you choose words that paint a picture? Are you speaking at a pace that allows the listener time to process and understand the message? Are you a good listener?

Working on the phone, your voice is your main tool. When someone hears your voice, he or she is developing a mental picture of who you are—your age, education level, believability and much more. To be understood, one must speak clearly. Clarity is accomplished through the different elements that make up vocal power. Some of the essential elements of vocal power are:

Diction - Clearly articulating and enunciating the words you use. Practice your diction by making sure that you hit all of the speech sounds contained in a word. When you run sounds together or leave end letters off words, you reduce clarity and also, potentially, your credibility.

Resonance - Provides a richness to the words you speak, making your message easier to understand.

Projection - Ensures that your voice can be clearly heard, so that you are neither too soft nor too overpowering.

Intonation - Provides emphasis and meaning to the words you are using. Change of pitch can entirely change a message. Proper intonation ensures you are conveying the appropriate message.

Pace - Your tempo animates your message. As your pace changes, so will the highs and lows (energy) in your voice.

Now that we've covered the elements of voice, let's look at how to make the words we chose work for us.

Words can either refine or confuse your message. Make sure the words you use fit the message you want to communicate and are appropriate for your customer. Use simple, common terms, avoiding acronyms and jargon that might be confusing. Selecting the right combination of words is not always as easy as it sounds. The English language is a rich language and provides us with many words to express what we want to say. The

words you choose can be powerful or pitiful. Practice describing scenes around you. Choose words that paint vivid pictures and that attract the listener's interest. Thinking about the words you use and practicing how you put your words together, will put the power of the English language at your disposal.

Communication is not a one-way street, although many of us may act like it is. Vocal power and word selection are outbound communication vehicles. To make communication a two-way street, we must add listening. Listening is an art. Most of us love to talk but find active listening to be a challenge. Rather than truly engaging when someone is talking, we disengage and start to plan what we are going to say next or are distracted by one of the many barriers to good listening. Some barriers we must deal with include noise, close-mindedness, impatience and imposed preconceptions.

Listening means staying focused and emotionally engaged when someone is communicating with you. This will build rapport and often provide you with the data you need to identify opportunities and solve problems. Listening also demonstrates that you care about what the speaker has to say. Your caring will build trust, allowing you to more quickly move into solution generation. At the same time, listening effectively, especially in a call center environment, requires objectivity on the part of the listener. Good listening builds cooperation and avoids errors, omissions and misunderstandings, which cost businesses millions of dollars every year.

O - Open the call with a winning statement.

Do you start every call with a winning statement? With an outbound call you only have about fifteen seconds to grab the listener, so craft your opening statement carefully. When handling inbound calls, your opening statement can help set the tempo for the call. Choose words that are intriguing and pique curiosity. Be engaging. Sound confident and enthusiastic. Create a statement that makes the listener want to know more. Grab them!

Whether making or accepting a call, you must sound confident and enthusiastic. You don't want to stumble over words, so decide what you will say and practice it with friends or in front of a mirror. Tape yourself and listen to how you sound. Are the words engaging? Is the voice smooth and confident? Does your enthusiasm shine through? If not, keep practicing!

When receiving an inbound call, forge a welcoming opening that lets the listener know you are there to provide impeccable service. Create a unique message.

In our society, one of the first opportunities you have to establish rapport is your greeting. An in-person greeting consists of making eye contact, smiling, approaching and extending your hand for a handshake with a verbal greeting. On the phone, we are missing most of these cues. What remains to us in our efforts to build rapport, are our voice, which is 84% of our message, and the words we choose, which is 16% of our message.

K - Know your product or service inside out.

You must be an expert on your product or service. Failure to answer questions or hesitancy in recommendations may cost you the customer's confidence. Do your homework. Study your discussion guide until you are completely versed in the product or service. Get someone to play "stump the telemarketer" with you. Get them to ask you questions about the product or service, looking for the unusual or difficult details. Practice until you can't be stumped. This will also help you improve your discussion guide.

E - Enthusiastically maintain confidence about yourself and your product or service.

Enthusiasm counts! Building on your great opening statement, delivered with enthusiasm and confidence, you can leverage this energy level throughout the conversation. You must be enthusiastic about yourself and your product. If you are tired, unsure, worried or, worse, don't care about the product or service you are selling, it will come through in your voice. Make sure you are mentally and physically ready to be enthusiastic and energetic throughout the conversation. Try some tongue twisters to warm up your voice and enunciation. And always remember your smile. A smile indicates a willingness to be approached, an openness. Smiles can be heard on the other end of your call.

If your product or service is you, present yourself in the best light possible.

GO for BROKE Worksheet

Below are activities that will help you deliver better customer service. Exercises and questions are designed to work on the knowledge, skills, and behavior you need to be successful.

Get Focused - List all the things that distract you when you are on the phone. Once you complete this list, go back and review it. Write down what you can do to eliminate or minimize the distractions. Next, take action on the ones you can control, and solicit assistance when needed.

Opportunity is Everywhere - Look around your environment. What skills do you possess or can you acquire that will make you a more valued employee? How do you build relationships that will help you within the business? What needs to be done to enhance the customer's perception of the business?

Believe in Yourself and Your Product or Service - Describe the value that you bring to your customers. How do you quantify that value?

Review Your Communication Habits - Locate some tongue twisters and practice them. Practice deep breathing. Write down a simple sentence, place the emphasis on different words, and hear how the meaning changes. Develop correct posture while in your chair. Develop listening skills by focusing on the speaker and managing listening barriers.

Open the Call with a Winning Statement - Write down your opening message. Practice with a tape recorder or a friend. Regularly revise and update your opening message to keep it fresh and up to date.

Know Your Product or Service Inside Out - Find the most knowledgeable person on the product or service. Ask him/her where you can find more information and if he/she will quiz you to test your knowledge. This will demonstrate your commitment to this coaching process. Most people love to help people who are willing to help themselves.

Enthusiastically Maintain Confidence about Yourself and Your Product or Service - List what causes you to lose your enthusiasm and confidence. Once identified, develop a strategy to counter those enemies when they appear.

GO for BROKE has shown us how to position ourselves to excel at delivering excellent customer service no matter what business we are in, how to overcome the obstacles in front of us and how to see our job and our customers in a new light. Next we will dig into Be a Customer CHAMPION which is all about what you do on behalf of the relationship you want to nurture and grow with each customer you touch. Understanding and incorporating into your approach, the essentials of championing your customer will separate you from the crowd, putting you at the top of your game.

C - Creatively use your resources.

No business has unlimited resources. In fact, the competitive advantage rests in how resources are utilized. Your competitors are striving to maximize their resources. Your creativity in resource management is a major contributor to your organization's growth.

If you want to be able to make the best decisions for you, your customer and the business, critical-thinking skills are required. Each day, employees make numerous decisions that affect performance and the overall quality and quantity of work produced by the company. Three major factors that demonstrate the effectiveness of each employee are the employee's knowledge of his/her job, the employee's relationship with others and the employee's attitude or emotional state.

Job performance increases with enhanced thinking skills. Critical thinking provides a fundamental methodology to look at one job function and identify where improvements can be made. In today's work environment, with the mantra of doing more with less, being able to see clearly how performance can be done faster, better, cheaper or not at all is the difference between success and failure.

H - Have respect for yourself and your customer.

Respect comes from your attitude, how you carry yourself and the image you project. Individuals with positive attitudes are most likely to think in the best interest of the customer and the business. Individuals with negative attitudes tend not to think in those terms. The consequences of attitude are always present but may be difficult to identify. Having a professional image and a positive attitude goes a long way to building customer relationships. Remember, the reason that seventy percent of customers go elsewhere has nothing to do with the product:

Twenty percent switch because they have too little contact and personal attention.
Fifty percent switch because the attention received was rude and unhelpful.

You have a tremendous impact on how the customer feels about The Business. Your behavior can make the difference in whether or not the customer chooses to buy from The Business or elsewhere.

A - Apply the power of questions.

Need an answer? Ask a question! Questions help us find our way when lost, make better decisions, change lives, improve processes, save lives and decide what to have for dinner. Questions are some of the most powerful tools we have.

For most of us, having the correct information is essential to doing a good job. Often, all the necessary information we need doesn't just present itself. We must seek it out. That's where questioning come in.

There are two forms of questioning that we can use—open and closed. Open questions encourage the sharing of information in a free-flowing manner. Through careful listening, you will discover and understand data you were not expecting, or your assumptions about a situation might be challenged. It is important to be prepared to handle the information you receive, to adapt and adjust to new circumstances.

Sometimes, we ask an open question and are overwhelmed with the information that comes back to us. For example, when you ask the question, "How are you?" you usually expect to hear, "Fine. And you?" What happens when the person asked really tells you how they are? You know, "My back hurts. My car broke down. My daughter's in a school play, and I have to get there this afternoon without the car. My boss is expecting this report before I leave. I had to make coffee this morning, because some idiot took the last cup and forgot to make a new pot. It's my turn to do the icebreaker at the staff meeting, and I don't feel like breaking ice. My dog bit the neighbor down the street, and now they are suing me." Is that enough information for you? More than enough! So we use open questions to gather lots of information.

The other kind of question we use is a closed question. Closed questions are used to

gather specific information. Some examples of closed questions are, "What is your name?" "How long has the service been out?" "What is the name of your service provider?" "What is your address?" "What is your phone number?" "Where is the product being shipped?" These questions are not designed to elicit a lot of information but rather limited, targeted facts.

You may be wondering, "What does this mean to me, my job and my ability to service the customer?" (Note that this is an open question designed to elicit a lot of information.) In order to do the job and provide good service to the customer, you need to have sufficient information to make good decisions and act in the best interest of the customer.

Think about using the basic journalism questions as a foundation for your information gathering. Those basic questions are who, what, why, when, where and how. Let's look at how these six simple questions can help you to successfully serve the customer.

Who? - Who is the customer? The more you know about who is involved, the better you can interact with the appropriate people.

What? - What are we doing? What do I know? What don't I know? (This is a powerful question! What you don't know can trip you up.) What is the goal? What are the objectives? What is the budget? What are the advantages of doing it this way? What is the down side? What will it take to achieve customer satisfaction? What did we do well? What could we have done better? It is essential for you to have a clear and common understanding of the what (the goal).

Why? - Why am I here? Why did the customer call us? Why is this customer frustrated? Why are we doing this job, in this way, with these tools? Why did we choose these methods? Understanding the why can help you see the big picture. Once you understand the big picture, you can move on to the other questions and collect some details.

Where? - Where is the problem? Where is the product/service needed? Where are you located? Where are the resources I need? Knowing the answer to "Where?" can save you a lot of time and aggravation. When you know where all the equipment/tools/people are, you don't have to waste time looking for them.

When? - When did the problem first occur? When would be the best time for me to get in touch with you? When will payment be made? When would you like to meet?

Knowing the when helps you to develop a timeline for your project.

How?- How long has the problem existed? How can we fix it? How could we make it better? How could we improve the product/service? The how question helps us to come up with new ways and to improve on old ones.

We ask questions, and we receive answers. Do we know everything now? No. You may know all that is possible to know at that given moment, yet you should never stop asking questions and gathering information. The more information you have, the better.

Let's look at five areas where questioning is a powerful tool:

- Obtains and clarifies information

We receive massive amounts of information all day long, both on the job and in our personal lives. On the job, we often find ourselves handling a customer request, a co-worker's need for assistance or our boss giving a job assignment. Often, we do not get all the information we need during our interactions. We may not be focused on the matter at hand, or perhaps we are distracted by outside elements. Obtaining accurate information and a clear understanding of circumstances will always save you time and help you avoid errors. It is important to stop for a minute and ensure understanding of the important messages you receive.

- Provokes thought

Have you ever been in a conversation where a question or comment made you stop and think? You realize you have never thought of something in that way. You just gained new insight! It may or may not change the way you think about something, but at the very least, it gives you a different perspective. Sometimes, you are asked a question that gives you a great deal to think about.

- Provides control in a situation

Questions are a powerful tool to control a situation. In fact, if used correctly, they provide you and others with a better understanding of a situation. By asking the right questions, you can obtain information that will assist in shaping your strategy for dealing with conflict. In fact, asking the right questions can help diffuse tense situations. Once you clearly understand the other person's point of view, you can move more quickly to a win-win position.

- Promotes the power of persuasion

The best way to get someone to see things from your point of view is through questions. We all have our own opinions. However, we may not have all the facts. If you can determine a person's perspective through questions, you can better ask questions to provide a different perspective. In fact, your audience may persuade themselves.

- Helps us to listen better

When we ask a question, we have a self-interest in hearing the answer. Learning the art of effective questioning assists us in becoming better listeners. If we do not listen effectively, the advantage questions provide us will be diminished. We have to listen to others to obtain true understanding. You will see improved relationships with your customers, fellow employees, management and those in your personal life. That is quite an incentive to improve your listening and questioning skills!

M - Make time to really listen.

There is no substitute for good listening. It makes the conveyor of the message feel valued. Good listening reduces mistakes and at the same time builds solid business relationships. Develop and implement an action plan to improve this vital communication skill.

First, listen to the customer. If you use active listening skills and demonstrate empathy, your customer will be more willing to listen to you. For example, a customer is upset with a bill she has received and is calling you. Rather than trying to explain the process (which the customer could care less about), listen, acknowledge what her complaint is and let her know you can understand how she could feel that way. You are not agreeing with her but rather expressing understanding. Remember, we have all been upset as

consumers at one point or another. If you let her vent, for example, she will calm down more quickly. Once she knows you are not fighting her or explaining how the company is right, she is more likely to listen to you.

P - Promptly respond to concerns.

When customers share their concerns with you, it is your responsibility to act. It is critical to business success that you do so. We would all like to give the customer good news; however, no matter whether it's good or bad, the information must be provided as quickly as possible and in a professional manner. In a call center, you are at a distinct disadvantage since the customer feels protected by distance and you cannot recognize her.

There's a saying that suggests you do not know whether or not you have a customer until a problem occurs. That's right; you need a problem to solidify customer loyalty. If you want loyal customers, you have to provide a service when they really need it, which is usually when they have a problem.

Being on the front line working with customers, one of your responsibilities is to successfully manage challenging and angry customers. So what do you do when things go wrong? The answer is to *think*, remaining in control when a challenge comes your way.

When any problem comes your way, be sure you understand the situation and take a few moments to analyze it. During this process, try to get the whole picture, not just your point of view. There is almost always another way to do everything. Consider all your alternatives before you take action. What is the best move for the customer? What will best meet his/her needs and concerns?

Implement the "No Excuses" rule.

Never tell a customer what you can't do; only tell him what you can do. I cannot emphasize strongly enough that telling a customer what can't be done is adding fuel to the fire. For example, let's say a customer is calling you because he wants something or has a problem. Rather than saying there is nothing you can do about it, you could document the problem and tell the customer how it will be followed up on and handled.

The reality is that your customer doesn't want to know what you can't do. Focus your answers and actions on what you can do. Think “positive action,” and make it something in your control. Don't blame others, even if it is their fault. Focus on what you and The Business are doing to make the situation right.

Offer win-win solutions.

We must understand both our customers and our needs. Talking win-win is easy. The actual practice is more difficult. We are surrounded by win-lose activities, including business competition, political elections and sporting events, just to mention a few. We must stay focused on the desired outcome and not remain attached to our personal outcome. We need to be mentally prepared to enter into a win-win agreement. If we take advantage of someone, we have violated basic relationship principles, and there will be consequences. Unexpressed feelings never die, and you will receive a payback, normally at the most inopportune time.

When you choose an alternative, own it. Whatever the outcome, you made the best choice you could based on the information you had at the time. Don't second guess yourself.

Nurture customer relationships.

Imagine your best customer experience and give it to each customer you interface with. There are many instances when we may respond to others according to how we perceive them. Imagine every customer as an excellent customer and treat him/her that way. Odds are, sooner or later, he/she will respond to you in like manner.

Always keep your customer's expectations at the forefront of your mind. This will tell you what direction to move in. Keep your focus on the customer, and make your decision using your organizational values.

Success in customer service comes from exhibiting behaviors that build rapport, listening and taking positive action.

When we do each of the things outlined in this chapter, we create winning opportunities

for ourselves and others. The long-term goal is to work each of these skills until it becomes part of our behaviors. That is, we don't have to think about what comes next; instead, we take action using the skills we've developed. The natural byproduct is great customer service, with you as the champion.