

7 Secrets for Great Customer Service

By Mike Brooks

In today's inside-sales environment, a customer-service rep can wear many hats. Often the services he or she offers blend pure customer service (in which a rep will take inbound calls from existing and potential customers) with order taking (in which the rep will take inbound customer orders), and even include proactive up-selling or prospecting into existing accounts. Today's reps must be adept at handling many types of customer interactions. Across these varying job descriptions, one thing remains constant: giving customers an outstanding experience. But how do we do that?

THE PROBLEM WITH MOST TRAINING

Training is crucial to developing a customer-service team, as well as to the overall experience a customer-service rep delivers. But most conventional training falls short.

Often, customer-service training is "top-end heavy," focused on product education and services while neglecting the fundamentals of the customer-interface experience. Companies tend to take for granted that reps will know intuitively how to make customers feel welcome and cared for—but, as anyone who has ever needed to call a phone or cable company knows, these fundamental courtesies are anything but common-sense, intuitive skills.

THE SOLUTION LIES IN PROPER TRAINING AND MEASURING CONSISTENCY

In order to develop a customer-service team that consistently delivers exceptional customer service, we like to start with a definition of customer service and then break it down into the training we consider fundamental to the overall customer-service experience. Here's our definition:

"Customer service is defined as how well a company is able to consistently exceed the needs of the customer."

We then break this definition down into what we believe are the



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fundamental elements of effective customer-service training:

- “Is able to” – Customer service is a set of skills that can be learned.
- “Consistently” – Great customer service means doing it all the time (not just when you feel like it).
- “Exceeds the needs” – Wowing the customer, not just giving them satisfaction.
- “The customer” – Great customer service treats the customer as an individual, rather than as a group or company.

In addition to fundamental training, follow-up mentoring, coaching, and measuring adherence to a set of best practices are also essential for the development, integration, and delivery of a great customer-service experience.

THE SEVEN SECRETS

Many elements make up an effective customer-service training program, but here are seven secrets we use as a base for introducing customer-service reps to the fundamentals of delivering a great customer experience.

Secret #1: Consistency is the secret to great customer service.

Think over where you consistently receive great customer service. How about a high-end department store like Nordstrom, or a luxury hotel like the Ritz Carlton chain? How about your local retail shop, coffee shop, or favorite restaurant? If you were to choose one phrase to describe what makes these experiences great, wouldn't it be "consistency of experience"?

All customers have a baseline expectation they expect will be fulfilled during every interaction with your company. Consistency of experience creates feelings of predictability, trust, and security. Your customers know you'll be there for them and that they will be taken care of. The more consistently you're able to meet and exceed your customers' expectations, the more they will want to do business with you and recommend you.

“Consistency of experience is the first step to great customer service.”

Secret #2: Personality is more important than knowledge.

Whenever a customer-service rep picks up the phone, you immediately know whether you are in good hands or not, don't you? A rep's tone and attitude project what kind of experience you're going to have. In fact, which customer-service rep would you rather speak to: A customer-service rep who knows everything but is not friendly, or a customer-service rep who is warm and friendly and willing to help you—and will find the answers you need?

As customers, we would rather speak to a friendly, helpful customer-service rep whose attitude is “Would you mind holding a moment while I find the right person for you to speak with?” than with a rep whose tone is unfriendly or disinterested. In customer service, attitude trumps knowledge.

How do you communicate your helpful personality over the phone? In one word: smiling. People can hear it in your voice when you're smiling, and they can hear it when

you're not. The secret of pushing your personality across the phone is “Never stop smiling.”

“If one of our customers comes into the store without a smile, I'll give them one of mine.”
Sam Walton (founder of Wal-Mart)

Secret #3: It's O.K. to make the occasional mistake or not have all the answers.

Too many customer-service reps feel like they have to have all the answers and are afraid to make the occasional mistake. When they do make a mistake, they tend to grow defensive or deny that they were wrong. Both approaches are incorrect.

The truth is, we don't have all the answers all the time, and we are going to make mistakes or give out incorrect answers occasionally. The key is in how you handle it. Here's what to do when you make a mistake:

Admit it. Denying it only makes it worse. *“You know, I think I may have given you the wrong (part number, extension, etc.). Let me try that again, please.”*

Apologize sincerely. *“I'm truly sorry for that.” “I apologize for that.” “That was my mistake.”*

Offer to try to help them again or to redo what just went wrong. *“Would it be O.K. if I tried that again?”*

Thank them for their patience. *“I want to thank you for your patience with this.”*

Secret #4: Prevent a customer who is having a problem from becoming a problem customer!

“Your most unhappy customers are your greatest source of learning.”
Bill Gates of Microsoft

A big part of a customer-service rep's job is to handle customers who are having a problem. From a company standpoint, the key to dealing with these customers successfully is to prevent a customer who is having a problem from becoming a problem customer.

Here's how you create a problem customer:

- You don't acknowledge their problem or the urgency of the situation.
- You don't empathize with them.
- You pass them off to voicemail.
- You don't update them on the solution.

The key to preventing problems from escalating? Be proactive!

- Acknowledge the problem.
- Empathize with the customer.
- Clearly lay out the next steps for the customer.
- Make regular contact with the customer in need of service.
- Update them on the progress of the solution.
- Check back to make sure the problem is resolved to their satisfaction.

Secret #5: Focus on building a relationship rather than making a transaction.

What would you say is the most important aspect of any relationship? We believe that trust is essential to developing an atmosphere of caring and competent support. And how do you build trust? By consistently and courteously guiding your customer through every step of your interaction with them, starting with:

The Opening.

Make your customer feel welcomed with a warm opening:

“Thank you for calling (Your Company) today.”

“It’s a great day at (Your Company)!”

“Good afternoon, this is _____ with (Your Company); how can I help you today?”

The Middle.

Continue this welcome in the Middle of the Conversation.

Make your customer feel well taken care of by saying something like:

“I can help you with that.”

“I’ll be happy to help you with that.”

“That’s something I can take care of for you.”

The End.

End by leaving your customers with a smile.

“Thank you for calling us today.”

“Thanks for calling, and you have a great day.”

“We appreciate your business! Have a great day.”

“If there is anything else we can do for you, just give us a call.”

**“Always do more
than is required of you.”**

George S. Patton

Secret #6: Courtesy is the #1 tool of every customer-service rep.

How do you feel when someone lets you in the lane in front of them in traffic? Or how about when someone holds the door for you at the market, or lets you get in front of them at the market when you have just a few items?

Probably pretty good. That’s how every customer-service rep should make you feel, as well. That’s why we say that being courteous and polite are your #1 tools to becoming a great customer-service rep!

Your top courtesy phrases:

“Please...”

“I’ll be happy to help you.”

“Would it be O.K. if I put you on hold?”

“Thank you very much for your patience.”

“Could you please hold while I check that for you?”

“Thank you for calling us today!”

And the key to using these phrases effectively is consistency!

Secret #7: Make every customer experience a win.

How would your customers describe their experiences with your customer-service team today?

Would they feel underwhelmed, dissatisfied, satisfied, happy they called, or that “this call was a win!”

The goal of all customer-service training should be to ensure that your team consistently delivers the kind of customer service that will keep your customers coming back and recommending your services. Here’s how to create a win:

- Be consistently courteous.
- Make your customers feel welcomed.
- Listen to and respond appropriately to their problem/request.
- Present the solution and get their buy-in.
- Go the extra mile.
- Make them feel special at the end of the call.

**“There are no traffic jams
along the extra mile.”**

Roger Staubach

CONCLUSION

As we mentioned at the beginning, great customer service is a culmination of a set of skills that can be learned and measured. It starts with proper training in these fundamental skills and continues with coaching their use on a consistent basis. The good news is that once these skills are internalized and become habits, these habits will then take over. The result will be the kind of consistent customer-service experience folks expect and deserve. **N**

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