

# Serving Your Customers



What is customer service? Customer service is the processes that make it easy for customers to do business with you. Everything from finding you in the first place, to initial contact, through quotation and sales, order status, delivery and invoicing should be designed to make it convenient for the customer. How an organization responds to the customer after the sale is critical to retaining that customer. Post-sales support should be dedicated to making the customer's use of your product a wonderful experience.

Why worry about customer service? In three words: your bottom line.

- It can cost up to five times as much to attract a new customer than to retain an existing one.
- The average business never hears from 96 percent of its unhappy customers.
- For every complaint received, the average company in fact has 26 customers with problems, 6 of which are serious in nature.
- Surprisingly, of the people who have problems, complainers are more likely than non-complainers to do business again with a company that upset them, even if the problem isn't satisfactorily resolved.
- Of customers who register a complaint, between 54 percent and 70 percent will do business again with the organization if their complaint is resolved. That figure goes up to an impressive 95 percent if the customer feels that the complaint was resolved quickly.
- The average customer who has a problem with an organization tells nine or 10 people about it. Thirteen percent of the people who have a problem with an organization recount the incident to more than 20 people.
- Customers who have complained to an organization and had their complaints satisfactorily resolved tell an average of five people about the treatment they receive.

Customer service starts with a clear vision of the customer using your product. Employee commitment to customer service begins when that vision is communicated to and understood by everyone in the organization. Employee commitment is supported with policies that clearly state how customers are to be treated. Commitment is achieved when employees are totally focused on meeting their customers' needs.

Excellent customer service is provided by employees who are trained to know who their customers are and how to exceed their customers' expectations. The employees who deal directly with the customers are the company in the eyes of the customer. These people are all the customer has to judge your firm by before they have received your products and services.

### **Assessing your current situation**

There are many ways to assess your organization. Good tools measure the following key issues:

- Making sure you know what your customers want and expect
- Being flexible in meeting customer demands
- Treating customers like partners rather than adversaries or end-users
- Making it easy for the customer to do business with you
- Having a positive attitude toward customers
- Encouraging customer feedback
- Responding to customer problems
- Developing repeat relationships
- Seeking to exceed customer expectations

The ability of an organization to constantly and consistently give the customer what they want and need means you must first assure you can perform the basics constantly and consistently. That means excellent internal processes first. Nothing will damage customer satisfaction more than promises not fulfilled. Going out to the marketplace will tell you what the customers want. If you promise them that, and then you cannot deliver it, you are worse off than if you didn't ask in the first place.

## Feedback

Before you can even ask a customer what they want, you have to frame the question in the context of what you want to deliver and are capable of delivering. When asked what they want, most customers will focus on one or two narrowly defined items of interest at that moment. If their last order was delivered late they might focus on on-time delivery. If the last shipment was of poor quality, they are likely to focus on the quality of the product. That is all good information but the answers are not true for the whole vision of the product. The answers are biased and not complete.

Sample operating procedures for outstanding customer service. A sample customer service mission statement: “In all our relationships our goal is to be professional, honest, courteous, responsive, flexible, open, empathetic, timely, credible, and accurate.” This goes for every contact, whether information sharing or enforcement actions.

1. Be helpful! Listen to your customers. Empathize and offer your help. Ask questions until you’re sure what the problem is, then restate the problem to confirm your understanding. Communicate to be understood, not just heard. Be polite and treat customers with professional courtesy and respect. Be patient.
2. Make clear, up-to-date, accurate and reliable information, products and services accessible.
3. Answer the telephone promptly.
4. Respond to all phone messages by the end of the next business day. Make every effort to answer questions immediately. Where that is not possible, provide a timetable for responding during the initial conversation. If the business is very large provide an organization-wide public information telephone line, which will help route inquiries.
5. Respond to all correspondence within 10 business days. If you need more time to research the answer, tell the customer when to expect your response and who is the contact person.
6. When customers contact via computer, provide a single address for connection to all resources on the Internet. Provide descriptions, including source and known quality of data made available electronically.
7. Work with the customer to find solutions. Be creative, flexible and cooperative. Give and get contact information so both of you can follow up.
8. Work collaboratively with partners to improve all products and services. Involve customers and use their ideas and input! Actively listen to customers’ concerns and needs regarding your services and develop technical assistance services to address those needs and concerns. Encourage customers to report back on unsuccessful referrals.

