

# *Ultimate Customer Service Guide*

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## Chapter 1: The ABC's of Customer Service

I remember an amazing incident, which happened several years ago. At that time, I was stationed in Germany which gets very cold and wet during the winter season. I had purchased a pair of woolen body fit pants. I had a habit of using branded products and so I ordered them from the eminent brand, L.L. Bean. The pants were of superb quality and I was really keen to use them when the mail order arrived. However within a week or so of the arrival of my pants, my unit was deployed to Kuwait for several months. The pants were stored secured in the cupboard and somehow I forgot about them completely! About 3 years later when we were moving, the pants were rediscovered. I was just going to dump them (as they no longer fit me any more) when my wife pointed out that the company offers a lifetime guarantee on their products. I laughed at her idea and said I really did not expect the company to replace the pants after 3 years even though they were unused and untouched. Still on her persuasion, I packed the item in an envelope and put in a note for replacing them.

I sent the envelope to the address of the company's headquarters in Maine. I told them my story and that I had outgrown my pants. This was treated as a family joke and soon we forgot all about it. Life was going on as usual for us when suddenly this amazing incident happened. After two months, a money order of \$1 from the company reached our home by mail. I swallowed my pride and shared the news with my wife, as I did not expect them to send back a penny for my old pants. The real surprise came after one month. Can you guess what was in it? It was a fresh pair of woolen pants from L.L. Bean, of the same color and my new size! We were astonished. When I inquired at the company's customer service, I was amazed to know that that the one dollar money order was sent to pay back my mailing charges for sending the old pants. My wife and I were stunned.

Naturally as you might guess, we told this amazing incident to all members of our family and relatives. Like us, they too were amazed. Well, now let me tell you a fact. Henceforth, all our family members, relatives and even friends purchase most of our requirements from this company throughout the year. We know for sure that they will never take people for a ride. Can you think of a company that has such effective lifetime guarantee? Now, that is what I call real customer service.

People make their buying decisions based on certain factors. There are some people who are brand conscious; some others look for ‘value for money’ and you will also come across people who hanker after freebies and bundled goodies. But in my opinion the wise consumer is the one who always buys products from a company that has a reputation for excellent after sales service or customer service. Just consider, would you buy products from a reputed company if there were no after sales service?

You can think of the relation between good customer service and an organization as that of blood and human lives. No matter how much discount and free goodies you offer to lure consumers, if you falter on retaining that customer base, your company shall never be really successful. When your organization has good customer service you will see the customers flocking back to it. Customers of a prosperous and good company come happy and go back happier. This happiness is what can make you smile. A satisfied customer ensures growth of the customer base. As a matter of fact, you can sell a product to a customer once using your sales skills. But one time selling should not be your objective if you are aiming at long-term goals. You should provide the customer exceptional services along with the product to ensure he comes back to your company for future buying needs.

A company with exceptional customer service record leaves the competitors behind in the long run simply because excelling in a business depends to a large extent on the goodwill of a brand in the market. There are many companies that make attractive products or many others who offer unique services, but companies providing superior customer service are not many. In this book I will take you through the various aspects of customer service that “wannabe” customer service personnel should know.

Before we delve into what good customer service really is, let me explain the definition of the term to you. The term Customer service, alternatively called Client Service, means the terms to serve a consumer during, before and after the purchase of a product or service. It is conceived in the corporate world as a sequence of processes performed to boost the consumer satisfaction level. It is implemented to ensure that a service or product meets the expectation of the customer. The customer service is provided either by a customer representative or by automated voice service. It is an essential component of a company’s customer policy.

Customer service can also be thought of as a cycle of activities meant to increase consumer satisfaction levels. The worth of the service depends on the industry, product and the consumer. Let me explain this to you. Suppose a person is an avid cell phone user. When that person goes out to buy the latest model of Nokia or Motorola mobile phone, he would not need as much pre-sales service or instructions that a first time buyer would. On the contrary, after buying the expensive handset, he will require robust after-sales-service. As a matter of fact, getting customer service assumes much importance when the customer is buying a service like a cell phone.

Customer service can be provided both manually and electronically. In the first case, customer service representative deals with it while in the latter; the customer gets an automated voice based interface to interact with. It is generally an indispensable part of

an organization's customer relation policy. I don't know about you, but I have a great dislike for automated customer service. If you want to increase your customer base and overall loyalty, hire a real person to handle your customer service needs.

The most important benefit of customer service is that it gives your company a competitive edge. Just think that all companies try offering innovations in products and pricing and the competition is intense. But providing quality customer service is not enough to keep the profits soaring. You also need to ensure that the quality of the service is not compromised. If there is a consistency in the customer service of your company it will earn a reputation in the market. To implement and maintain this, you need to incorporate appropriate technology, staffs and methodologies.

I will give you another example of what excellent customer service can do for a company. In the 1990's, Calvin Klein men's wear got a call from a customer. The customer was pleasantly surprised when he found that the company's customer care representative knows his name. On further query, he came to know that they got it from AT&T's database. He was also amazed to know that the company's spokesperson was aware of his address, his past purchases and even what colors he preferred. The customer did not call to place an order originally, but he was so impressed with their feedback that he immediately ordered a catalogue. He has remained a loyal customer of that store ever since.

There are some organizations that have the provision of providing customer service during regular business hours and hours beyond it. The regular business hour is set according to the company's time zone and a customer calling at that time can expect full fledged service including new order placing, tracking past orders and resolving problems. On the other hand, a customer calling after business hours will be given the provision of placing new orders. Isn't that a good idea? Now being a person who is in business, I am sure that you will agree that customers often make purchases on impulse. And what can be a better way than to take their orders instantly. That's the reason why you need to provide customer service even after regular working hours.

Now, you may wonder why good customer service is so important for an organization. I have already told you that it is nothing short of the lifeblood of a company. I am going to explain a couple of obvious benefits of providing good customer service for a company.

- **The advantage of customer retention.** Your organization can build a healthy customer base by offering competitive prices and discounts on the products. But it is more important that the company can retain those customers to ensure success in the long run. Only if the organization can provide excellent customer service, those customers will come back to it and re purchase in future. This will ensure the profits remain on the higher side.
- **Increase in customer base.** When a company provides good customer service to the consumers, the customers develop a liking for the company. It is a psychological and universal process. I, for instance, prefer buying electronic

appliances from my neighborhood departmental store in my town, Surprise than going to the gigantic retail outlet in Phoenix. This is because a number of my family members have bought from this store and though it sells the same products that we can buy somewhere else we trust this store for its co-operative nature. When a customer is happy about the service he is getting from a company he is sure to pass favorable feedbacks about it to his friends and relatives. You can think of it as an indirect marketing done by the satisfied customers on your behalf. People also count on the knowledge of their known people before purchasing a product so in the end you will see your company's customer base growing.

If you are a customer care personal working in a company, you may wonder why you would read this book. You may feel that taking extra care about serving the customers is not going to make a difference. But I can confidently tell you that you stand to gain from it. Providing good customer service not only adds to the growth and profit of your company, but it also enables you to acquire many important skills. It can be used as a tool to sharpen your professional capabilities. You have to remember that it is not your employer whom the customer sees as the representative of the company. You are the person he has to interact with directly. Therefore, your behavior, mannerism and actions can make or break the image of the company to him. You have the capability to affect their perception about the organization. This aspect leaves a huge onus on your shoulder and you should make sure that you execute the job properly.

It does not really matter how long you are in the customer service sector as long as you can treat the customers in a positive and professional way. Actually, the more you interact with the customers, the more you learn how to deal with various customer grievances. There is no way you can bypass the responsibility. It is something you have to learn to excel in the trade. Dealing with customers means dealing with the nuances of human psychology. The human mind is complex and likes and dislikes can be difficult to guess. It is not always possible to guess what a customer may like or detest. But with patience and experience you can equip yourself with handy skills that can be used to resolve tricky situations in this industry. Even a disappointing experience with a customer can teach you a lesson. In this book, I will provide you with the inside tips and tricks of the sector that you can use to your advantage. I will also tell you about the pitfalls you should avoid to win the customer's confidence. You can employ these tricks regardless of which industry you work in or aspire to join in future.

**Increased job satisfaction and less chances of burnout.** A significant advantage of providing good customer service for an employee is that he/she can gain job satisfaction from it. Sure, money rules the roost for everyone, but if at the end of the day your work leaves you feeling bored and disgusted, will you continue with it for long? I know I won't. There are a number of people who complain about the amount of time they have to spend at work and think that it is simply wasted. This is detrimental for any organization as well as its workers. As an employee, you need to feel productive, useful and happy about the type of work you are doing. Time can be a major contributor to stress. It is good if you can limit the amount of stress in your professional and personal

life. Life would be great if we could remove all stress, but we can't. However, there are things we can do to limit the amount of stress we experience. If you provide superior customer service, it gives you a mental fulfillment that you are making a difference for someone. When you succeed in pacifying an enraged customer, you feel like you have accomplished something. When a customer gives you a compliment, you really feel overwhelmed about yourself and your job. These actions significantly reduce the amount of job related stress and burn out.

**Enhancing the job prospects.** When you develop core customer service skills you can analyze ways to win the favor of the senior executives and management people in your organization. You get an idea about what attributes are preferred by the supervisors, team leaders and prospective employers. This plays a decisive role behind getting increment and promotions in the job. When the customers prefer a customer service representative of a company over others, that employee wins some brownie points in the eyes of the supervisors and managers.

**Enhancement of mindset analysis skills.** You have to remember that when you deal with a customer directly your treatment of him plays a vital role behind developing the perception of the customer about the company. Therefore, the image of the company's customer service depends on the customer service representative to a large extent. After working with different type of customers for some time you will be able to learn the tricks to make a customer feel positive about the company's services. It will go a long way in helping you win the trust of the customers. You will also be able to know how to deal with the difficult consumers and the ways to motivate them as well. In other words you will become a good judge of people's buying psychology.

**Development of Professional acumen.** Resolving customer service problems will become a cakewalk for you with time and you will acquire strong analytical and reasoning skills. Those will help you in your professional life in the long run. There are some basic principles of customer service that is applicable in various industries like travel and tourism, health care, shopping malls etc and following them proves beneficial both for the business and its owner. Even if you move to a different sector in future this knowledge will definitely help you.

To ensure that the customers are happy and they come back to the company for repeated purchases, providing basic customer service will not suffice. A company needs to develop *exceptional customer service* that leaves the competitors biting the dust. Since the consumers are spoilt for choice as far as choosing brands is concerned the quality of the customer service should be outstanding in the proper sense of the term. Exceptional customer service means the capability of a company to consistently and relentlessly surpass the expectations of the consumers. Therefore every aspect of a business should be made to affect the customer service in a positive manner. For this purpose a company needs to implement innovative policies and keep a watch over what the rival brands are not doing. In other words, the customers should be made to think of the company's service as unique and unparalleled. This small story is a huge example of exemplary customer service.

Recently, my wife and I were applying for a loan. My wife works for a huge financial institution. We have our accounts and insurance through another huge financial institution. However, when it comes to customer service, we have had one particular lady (we will call her Sherrie) at a complete different institution that we prefer. So, we gave Sherrie a call, and as usual, she was extremely cheerful and helpful. She said the loan would not be a problem. Well, that was not the case at all. We ran into several hiccups with the underwriter. However, throughout it all, Sherrie kept in constant contact with us, sometimes several times a day. She did not always have an updated status, but she kept us in the loop. I commended her for her customer service. It is people like her who keep people like me coming back. If Sherrie decides to leave her current place of employment, you better believe we will be following her.

Some people are making use of Live Customer Services in web based activity areas. It enables interactive customer communication. Some companies also add a touch of personalization in their customer service. They want to make the customers feel that they are treating him in a special way. For instance, some companies keep the name and identifications information of its clients and do not enquire about it when the customer calls. This can make a big difference in some cases. I know about a short tempered man in Chicago who had a notoriety of howling at customer service personnel like a hound. He became sweetness personified when one representative from Jockey sportswear called him to verify whether his orders were delivered in time. The customer care guy called him by his name and that did the trick! That customer now buys regularly from that shop.

Technology has come to the rescue of business owners looking for cutting edge customer service solutions. Some companies are implementing Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software for this purpose. The software is designed to gather information from several different sources and integrating them into one common database. The widespread use of mobile phones has made some companies interested in Short Message Service (SMS), commonly referred to as "texting," based customer feedbacks about service quality. This will make gathering consumer opinions for companies easier and quicker as the number of mobile users is rising with time.

Texting is becoming more and more popular everyday, especially with the younger generation. When my son got his first cell phone, we immediately purchased an unlimited texting plan. It's a good thing. He sends over 5,000 text messages a month. And according to the parents of some of his friends, he is just a rookie. They have national championships for the fastest "texter." We need to start recognizing the importance of technology in our society today, and more important, the next generation.

Another important thing to remember is that the customers usually are ready to forgive companies who admit their mistakes and seek apology instead of denying their shortcomings. If the customer service person does not pay heed to the customers complain and grievances, chances are there the company will end up losing the customer permanently. It would be advisable to identify the root cause of the problem and treat the case with seriousness. A couple of years ago, I had a customer that was unhappy with

their mystery shop. It had nothing to do with our shopper or the technology. The person being shopped just did a poor job. I immediately called the customer and apologized and told her we would make it right. It took about 5 minutes to resolve, and by the time we got off the phone, she was singing our praises. She continues to be a loyal client. It certainly was worth it to take this client seriously. Is she my largest client? No. Actually, she is one of my smaller clients. However, she has referred other companies to me and has always been someone I could list as a reference.

- **Customer Relationship Management (CRM): all that you need to know**

From the aforesaid contents, it should be clear to you that developing and maintaining a healthy relation with the customers is very important for a company and its customer service persons. That is why the concept Customer Relationship Management or CRM has become very popular with companies nowadays. Basically CRM is a consumer oriented business methodology that aims to increase profits through meeting customer expectations. This involves technologies that enable the storage, analysis and capture of vendor, consumer, alliance and inherent process information. It spans over the various sections of a business like Marketing, Sales, Customer Service, Human Resources, Training etc. A customer based strategy is also required to execute CRM properly in a company.

- **Technology considerations for implementing CRM**

For implementing CRM in an organization, the technology requirements need to be decided by certain factors. I will tell you about the decisive factors in a jiffy.

The first thing the company needs to consider is the database containing customer lifecycle information. This database contains information about the customer's buying habit, survey responses, order information etc. The other important aspects are Customer Intelligence, Business Modeling, Quality monitoring and analysis, Social networks and Collaboration etc.

- **Various types of CRM models**

There are different types of CRM models and they are discussed below.

The *Operational CRM model* is meant for supporting business processes done at the front office section. It can be implemented in marketing, service and sales. There are a number of call centers that employ certain CRM software to ease the work of their agents.

Customer data is processed by Operational CRM for several purposes like Enterprise Marketing Automation, Managing Campaigns and Sales Force Automation.

The *Analytical CRM* usually employs data mining heavily. It also processes consumer data for various reasons. The reasons include execution and design of particular consumer campaigns, consumer behavior analysis, management decision etc.

The *Collaborative CRM model* is used to coordinate the various support and services offered to the consumers. It addresses customer grievances or queries. It also stresses on sharing of customer feedback between various departments of a company to enhance customer service quality.

The *Geographic CRM* or GCRM model combines conventional CRM and geographic information. This method helps a company to trace potential consumers in a region and also to deal with present consumers in a region.

A number of different CRM application packages are readily available. But you must understand that CRM is not just a piece of technology. It is an all inclusive customer oriented service methodology. It involves a lot more than just the technology. Therefore, the CRM strategy of a company should be made keeping its aim and customer requirements and expectations in mind. The CRM approaches can vary in complexity, scope and size. Ideal CRM software should not compromise the consumer's privacy and security while collecting data about him.

In this introductory chapter I have tried my best to give you an idea about the importance of customer service from various perspectives. You should understand the advantages of effective customer service after reading this. In the subsequent chapters I will touch on more specific sections of this sector and you will get to know the industry tips for shining in this field. At the end, remember there is no substitute for good customer service. A good customer service will allow you to build up your base of loyal customer. *The result: Your business will flourish like never before.*

## ***Chapter 2***

# *Setting Service Standards*

Now that you have some idea about the advantages of customer service, you also need to know the importance of providing and maintaining a good service standard. Setting a quality service standard is vital for the sustenance and flourishing of a company in the long run. To provide and maintain consistent high quality customer service, it becomes imperative for a company to set a standard.

Before you set the service standard or plan for it, you should remember to adhere to the golden rule of customer service. The customer is, after all, a human being and it is natural for him to make mistakes. But as a business owner, you should never tell him that he is at fault even if you know darned well that he is actually wrong. There is no use in trying to win an argument with a customer. If the customer wins the argument, chances are that he will come back to your organizations. If the customer loses the argument, you are sure to lose his favor, forever. It is certainly about winning – the customer should always win.

## **What exactly is Customer Service Standard?**

Customer service standard is when a business owner plans his customer service strategy in such a way that it makes the customers happy and gives them very little chances of grievances. The core values of the concern determine the standard of customer service. The standard should be customer friendly so that they feel like coming back to your organization after the first purchase. It is equally important to adhere to a standard after implementing it. This ensures the goodwill of the company remains intact in the long run. The business owner can play a significant role behind this. The employee evaluation can be done on the basis of customer service performance. This will help the workers adhere to the service standards consistently.

## **The importance of setting up a Customer Service Standard**

It is imperative for any company to have a customer service standard in place. This standard acts as the professional guideline for a customer service executive in the company. If the company falters in this aspect, it will be a daunting task for its customer service executive to deal effectively with different consumers. The professionalism and reputation of the organization will be at stake. Therefore, there should be a dedicated customer service standard policy in a company and efforts should be made to adhere to the standard and surpass it if possible.

Customer service standards can be classified into two categories, internal and external. The former is meant for internal consumers or workers. The internal service standard needs to be met in order to adhere to the standards meant for serving external consumers. If the two service standards are met, then the end user or consumer gets benefited and satisfied by the service. Let me give you an example to explain this concept.

Suppose, a gym equipment manufacturer assures a consumer that his package will be delivered the next day at 11 am. In this case, the company is setting only the external service standard. To make sure that the product delivery takes place in time, the company also needs to set up its internal service standard. Therefore, a pick up time for the product should be fixed and a specific time should be set for reaching the delivery hub. If the company is supplying the product to a different country, then a specific time needs to be set for air transport and off loading as well. If everything is synchronized both in the internal and external service standard, then the product will reach the destination on time. The consumer service standard maintenance depends on the workers assigned for executing duties in both segments.

You can very well guess what might happen if there is lack of synchronization in the company. The client will wait for the product but it will not be delivered in time. As a result, he will become angry and cancel the order and claim refund. One thing that I can confidently tell you is the customer will never buy anything from that company again. The conclusion is that setting up standards is not adequate; they need to be enforced and achieved, too.

### **Motivating your employees - why you need a Customer Service Standard:**

If you own a business, you may think that when you already own a customer service department why is it necessary to have a standard? I can confidently tell you that only making elaborate policy for customer service will not suffice. As a business owner, you need to motivate the employees to maintain a high service standard and make them aware of its benefits. You have to help them understand that it is through them that the customer sees the company. Their mannerisms, behaviors and activities can break or make the perceptions of the customers about the company. You need to provide the employees adequate training for maintaining service standards consistently. You should stress the service standard as an integral part of your company policy.

The process of maintaining service standard is not a one time thing that you can apply and forget. You need to be aware whether the employees are sticking to the standard and adopt some innovative measures that can inspire them to maintain and uphold the standard. Apart from training the workers, you can use the assistance of customers. While this sounds a little bit off, it is actually practiced by many companies who use customer feedback to assess the competence and professionalism of their employees. For example, you can employ the system of coupons for customers with codes for employees. The employee liked the most by the customer will get the maximum points. You can reward those employees with cash rewards or similar incentives. This will inspire them to work hard and maintain the service standard. This in turn will motivate the other employees to strive for excellence in service. This will automatically lead to a superior service culture in the organization. The bottom line is to reward your employees for a job well done, and you will see a major cultural change in your organization.

### **Setting up Customer Service Standards: the three Ps and their importance**

Many issues will arise when you want to develop a good customer service standard in your organization. You may have to deal with numerous questions, and at times, can

baffle you. A better way to handle these issues is to implement the 3P's – Procedure, Perception and Personnel. This is a time tested method that can be implemented in an organization to ensure that it does not falter on the customer service standards. Let me explain the 3P's in a simple to understand level.

*Perception:* To develop customer service standard strategies, you need to deal with customer perception logically and systematically. Various clients can have different perceptions and their priorities may vary. Everybody has a different mindset. What seems to be good and acceptable to one may be detestable for another person. There are various factors that dictate people's choice like children, job type, weather, preconceived notions, etc. Therefore, any change in the customer service plan that can impact the service standard, should not be incorporated on the basis of a particular customer's feedback or complaints. Remember, perception is reality. It does not matter what we think – it matters what the customer thinks.

*Procedure:* To understand the perception of your clients, you should rely on surveys, in house observations, mystery shopping results, and similar well documented data. After going through these systematically arranged data, you can have a grasp on which areas alterations can be made. For instance, if the customers feel that a mobile company they subscribe to lacks cutting edge technology, the owner can incorporate Wi-Fi in its premises to serve the customers better and redeem its image as well. Or if the majority of customers prefer human interaction in place of automated voice, then you can simply increase the number of customer care personnel. However, never make any infrastructural or operational alteration without giving it enough thought. As my father-in-law so fondly tells me, "Measure a thousand times, and cut once." Check, recheck, and check again before making any major changes in your organization.

Sometimes you may find that a particular procedure is the root cause behind the negative perception. It may happen that the service manual of a company is obsolete and that makes the customers think that the company is employing outdated technologies. The demographics, spending habits and lifestyles of people change with time, and as an entrepreneur you are expected to keep up with time. To succeed in today's fiercely competitive market, a company should update its portfolio, product range and infrastructure. These help to build a positive service standard.

*Personnel:* The last and most important issue to consider is Personnel. The service standard of your company cannot remain high unless you recruit the right kind of people in various positions. While recruiting the customer service representatives, the owner should make sure that the employees have a customer friendly attitude, are trainable and competent. Human interaction is a major component in service standard of a company. In some cases, the customer may be wrong. But a wise and practical customer service person will not tell him he is wrong. In doing so, he may win the argument but the company would lose the customer. After all, all of us are human beings and we have our limitations. But for practical gain, sometimes it pays to subdue one's ego and let the customer feel he is right even if he is not.

A customer service personnel should be highly trainable. You have to remember a company should function professionally even with its own employees. If an employee cannot operate according to the training after repeated attempts, and even counseling does not work, never hesitate to replace him with a worthy candidate. I am not saying that you should follow a strict hire and fire policy, but maintaining the service standard is something that should not be compromised. You have to remember the impetus to do well should come from the side of the employee. The employee must be internally motivated and have a strong desire to uphold the service standards.

However, if you feel that sending that employee to another section would be better than replacing him with some one else, do that without hesitation. So let's start thinking about how to develop your customer service standard. Before you set the service standards, there are some questions which you must ask.

### **Ways to develop effective Customer Service Standard**

Before you plan to set up a service standard for your organization, you need to do some self introspection. You need to develop a team for planning an effective service standard. If you own a small company you can ask for opinions from everyone. If the company is big, take the head of each department into the planning team. Get people involved. This allows them to take ownership and accountability for their actions. There are some basic questions that you need to ask yourself prior to setting a service standard. Discuss the following questions with your team.

1. What is your company's concept of success?
2. What is your Mission Statement?
3. What is the result you are aiming at?
4. What is the company is all about?
5. What does the company consider to be important?
6. For what aspects does the company want to be known?
7. How can the company meet the needs of the customers?
8. How can the company achieve consistency?
9. How can the focus be set on the customers?
10. What are the ways to include customer interactions in the standards?
11. How can the company devise effective customer statements to reach out to customers?
12. How can the model for customer service be used to convey that the company gives priority to resources, quality and timeline in the service standards?

Now that you have introspected and decided to enhance your customer service standard, let me tell you some key strategies, which you need to follow in order to enhance your customer service standards.

### **Comparison is the key**

If you really want to enhance the quality of the customer service of your organization, you should compare it with the competitors in the industry. Strike the last part of that sentence. You actually do not have a choice. There is no reason to shy away from

benchmarking against the rival brands. For overall improvement of the consumer service standard, you can also compare your enterprise with players belonging to different industries.

As an entrepreneur, you should always strive to keep your service standard way above that of the rivals. You may pose as a customer and watch the various aspects of the competitor's service standards. Alternatively you can send secret shoppers on your behalf to do the job. For judging the competitors you can ask yourself the following questions after the survey is done.

1. Are the competitor's employees greeting their customers?
2. Are they providing personalized services to their clients?
3. What is the knowledge level of the staffs out there?
4. Do they use voicemail or live service?
5. How do the staffs behave with the customers?
6. How updated are their technologies and services?
7. How responsive were the staffs to the customer queries?
8. Did you like the experience?
9. What is the quality of their follow up service?
10. Did they store your contact information for future contact?
11. How professionally do they resolve customer grievances?
12. What do you think of their future prospects? How prospective they are?

After you make an evaluation of the competence and viability of your competitor's standard, you can plan your own service standard. Here you can ask yourself some questions.

1. How does your plan stand out from the rival company? What is your different and better story?
2. Why you were impressed with their strategy?
3. What areas of customer service do they excel in?
4. How do you make an effective plan that leaves the clients totally impressed?

What all this boils down to is that you have to develop a plan that will enable your company to resolve challenges. These challenges need to be resolved in a time frame in which the follow-up can be performed properly. You have to stop *meeting* the expectations and start *exceeding* the expectations.

### **Make evaluation a consistent procedure**

A business owner should evaluate the standard of his company's customer service on a regular basis. I heard a saying that you cannot expect what you don't inspect. As I have already mentioned, maintaining the standard is as important as achieving it. An unprofessional customer care representative in an organization can dent the image of the company to the customers and that can be detrimental to the company. Therefore, quality checking should be given a priority in service standard management.

As an employer, you need to make sure that your working team is truly gifted. To enhance the productivity of the customer service department, you need to recruit only the

talented people. The people with an acumen for customer service can take the service standard of your company to new heights. Motivate your workers to develop lasting and healthy customer relationships in order to maintain a high service standard. While recruiting workers for your company, make the screening process tough to ensure only the eligible persons get through the interview. You have to remember that the customer service personnel represent the image of your company to the clients. They are the face of your company. According to a study, nearly 68% of consumers never come back to a company because of the unprofessional and apathetic treatment performed by its customer service persons. If you put yourself in the consumer's perspective, you can visualize the situation when a customer service person ignores or neglects your queries over phone. I think the majority of our employees have become calloused to genuine care and concern about the customers' feelings.

Even after you recruit the most talented of the candidates, it becomes imperative that you constantly train and motivate them to deliver their best in the larger interest. I can tell you from my experience that most of the consumer problems get resolved if the issues are tackled in time. Timing is the key factor here. Therefore, the customer service personnel in your company should be trained to focus on a solution centric approach for solving the problems.

Just recently I had a discussion with a senior housing client who was just getting beat up by her lower management. They were not respecting her authority and were obvious in showing it. When the "big boss" would address key issues, they were smiling to his face and giving him the hand behind his back. My solution was quite simple. A consultant needs to come in and visit with each of the communities and conduct focus groups with the individual employees and the key decision makers. The focus groups with a third party consultant will encourage open and honest responses. A report and brief will then be given to the management with an appropriate aggressive action plan. Decisions will have to be made and enforced promptly. The longer this goes on, the worse it is going to get. It is time to stop talking about it and actually doing something about it.

### **Use consumer Feedback**

If you think that instructing the workers to just treat customers well is enough, you are making a gross mistake. They should be made to understand the importance of maintaining a good consumer service standard in a practical way. You can effectively use the customers to provide feedback to help maintain this standard. For example, you can use evaluation cards to enable the employees earn bonus personal days on the basis of positive customer feedback. You can also give small incentives to the customer service representatives who get high marks from the customers. This type of rewarding schemes will make the employees striving to attain a service standard and eventually lead to the creation of an outstanding service culture in the organization.

You need to be sure your consumers understand that you have a soft corner for them. You can think about customer appreciation occasions, which may be an annual event to show that you are concerned about them. This enables customer –company interaction

and enables you to gain knowledge on your areas of strength and weakness from the customer's perspective.

As I have already told you, the key is innovation and creativity. Once you come up with a plan for improving service standards, you need to update it from time to time. You can implement new ideas from time to time. I would encourage you to break the stereotypes and think out of the box. Even if it does not make any huge difference to your company's profits (though I believe it will), the customers will think of your company as a different one from the rivals that is dynamic and progressive in approach. It will help you in changing the image of the company.

It would be a good idea to keep a time frame for updating your plan. It could be bi – annual or yearly. Actually it all depends on the industry type and mechanism. Some businesses are required to modernize their plans with time to cope up with changing industry needs to keep themselves one step ahead of the competitors. Take a close look at your organization and make the necessary changes and updates that seem appropriate.

### **Create a mission and work together**

The policy of the company should incorporate customer service standard as an integral part of its mission. This will ensure that the employees will give it adequate importance. The employees can be trained to bring professionalism in their approach and deliver results as per the standard. A team can be formed to set up the customer service standard. In case of a large organization, the heads of each department like Sales, HR, and Marketing can be leaders of the team. It has to be a team effort though. It cannot simply be an individual effort. You are only as strong as your weakest link. If someone is not being a team member, provide the training and resources to resolve the problem. If the problem cannot be resolved, either move that team member to a place in the company or move them out.

This chapter has covered the main aspects of service standards and its importance in customer service. I have given you the tips to shine as well as the pitfalls to avoid. If you practice these advices and act logically, your company will make a place in the realms of customer service. In the next chapter we tell you all about how to create an effective customer service plan.

## *Chapter 3*

# *Forming a Customer Service Plan*

Customer service is not only limited to providing your customers with their requirements on time. It means making a customer feel delighted about your services. Always remember that you should provide such service to your customers that they keep coming back to you and are always eager to continue doing business with you. At present, it has become very difficult for businesses to retain their customers as they are always facing a variety of competition and challenges. Besides, customers have their own demands, which if not fulfilled in time create negative impact on the minds of the customers. Non-fulfillment of demand can even lead to losing potential customers. However, if you are able provide good customer service, you will be able to satisfy the demands of your customers and thus retain them.

Apart from retaining customers, good customer service will help in the creation of customer loyalty. You can build an emotional bond with your customers by providing them with excellent customer service. Customers being satisfied with your service will start patronizing your business. However, you can create an emotional bond by providing your customers with something extra than what they wanted from you. By adding a human touch to your service, you will be able to create a rapport with your customers. However, when providing customer service, always remember customers prefer those service providers who can provide them with quick and efficient services. Your customers will always expect that all their queries will be easily resolved by you. Whenever your customer calls you, they expect that you will promptly receive their call or return their call if not readily available. So, when providing customer services, always keep in mind the expectations of your customers. By fulfilling these expectations of your customers, you will be able to provide them with efficient customer service. However, as a customer service professional, you should always prepare a plan in order to provide the best service to your customers.

First and foremost you should know what a customer wants. In fact, it is vital for a company to assess what the customers want. The needs and requirements of the customer change with time. With the advent of the Internet and growth of the media, the customers have many choices in his hand. Therefore, they will not hesitate to switch to a competing brand if they are dissatisfied with any aspect of customer service of a company. Once you understand what the customer wants, you can apply the various techniques in your company's customer policies and increase the level of customer satisfaction.

When the customer needs are clear to a company, the amounts of grievances, conflicts and hassles will be reduced. This will result in the creation of a positive relationship between the workers and the customers. There are certain things that the customers want in a company's service. When these criteria are fulfilled they hold the company in high esteem.

### **Customers want quick solution to their problems**

This is quite comprehensible. When a customer buys a service or product, problems are the last thing that they expect. You do not buy a mobile set to keep it unused, but to communicate. If there is a problem, you would naturally look for the solution. Therefore, the customers expect the customer service department of a company to have solutions to any problems they face in using its products and services. This is among the basic customer needs. However, no company can have solution for each and every customer problem. But instead of turning the customer down, it would be practical and advisable to offer alternative ways to resolve a crisis and create a positive perception.

### **Customers have certain expectations of the customer service personnel**

Everybody pays money to buy a product or service from a company and that money does not come from charities. Therefore, when a customer invests his hard earned money after a product and it "conks" out due to some unfortunate reason, he expects that the company and its people should put in the required efforts to repair it. The customers are also

human beings and they understand that it is not always possible to solve a problem but if the customer service persons put in their endeavor the customer acknowledges it. The genuine efforts of a company to address customer problems put the company in a high perspective even if the problem remains unsolved.

### **Customers want acknowledgment and understanding**

A customer expects the company representative to give adequate attention to his needs or problems. Patient and careful listening on the part of a customer service person can soothe the mind of an agitated customer. When the customer's complaints are paid enough attention he feels important. This is a common human trait and the companies should make use of it to win the customers favor.

### **Customers prefer choices and options**

When a customer is given choices for buying or replacing products or services, he feels privileged. The trick lies in making them feel that the decision making power lies in their hands and the company is merely assisting them. On the other hand, when a customer is given minimal choices he feels trapped and irritated.

### **Customers love surprises**

Most people love to be surprised. The surprises do not need to be something very expensive. For instance, if you run a food joint, you can offer free home delivery for orders exceeding a certain amount or offer free beverages with every order. The competition is fierce nowadays in any industry and to prevent losing the customers to the rival brands, you have to introduce unexpected surprise gifts and attractive goodies for the customers. You can also offer discounts or give some offer that gives your business a competitive edge. It also work wonders with difficult-to-impress customers.

### **Customers expect reliability, consistency, and predictability**

Consistency in customer service is very crucial. If a customer comes back to a company for another purchase, he will expect similar treatment and benefits that he got the first time. If your company provides the same level of service each time the customer makes a purchase or asks for a service, he will consider your company to be reliable. If the level of service gets better over time, then you have delighted the customer. This goes a long way in expanding the customer base.

### **Customers prefer value**

By value, I do not mean the least expensive product. Customers would rather appreciate the best quality product at the most reasonable price rather than the least expensive alternative. When a customer buys a product, one of the things he considers is the value of time. In other words, he expects the product to last and perform for a certain time period. Is it going to last? Is there a warranty? How will my problems be handled if there are issues or concerns?

Customers also notice how the company is providing assistance in using and utilizing the product. So many times we get a "crash course" on particular items as we are heading out the door. A few hours later, we have forgotten our lesson or have other questions. It

is nice when there are options in place to contact the company for assistance. This will be your customer service's first chance to make a good impression. Remember, first impressions are last impressions and can drive customer loyalty.

### **Simplicity is the keyword to customer satisfaction**

Everybody lives a hectic life nowadays and complication in the customer service is the last thing that the customers expect. If the customer service of a company makes a customer go through several avenues, he will feel angry and frustrated. The customer service system should be straightforward and involve lowest possible hassle for the customers. Simplicity is a goal in itself. Complexity should be avoided at all costs. Extra features are not needed; an approach that seems "too easy to be true" is more times than not the best way. A very straightforward approach may seem less glamorous and less dramatic, but the trivial approach should indeed be taken. Surprisingly, the very obvious approach is often the best. Just remember the KISS principle – "Keep It Simple, Silly."

### **Customers like speed**

As you know, people have very little spare time these days. In my busy life, there is no such thing as "spare" time. If there is something that needs to happen that is not on my calendar, I have to make time for it. So the quicker a company can provide the service to the customer the better it is for them. A slack and lackadaisical response from a company ensures its fall from public favor. If you can't be quick with the resolutions, at least be responsive.

### **Confidentiality is important**

People expect the companies to keep their personal information a personal thing. Therefore, your company should stress on the confidentiality of customer information in its policies. Even when the customer talks with the company representatives, he prefers some amount of confidentiality.

### **The feeling of importance**

Every human being loves to feel that he is being given importance. This is what boosts the human ego. Actually, the other needs translate into this fundamental need in the end. The typical techniques and phrases used in customer handling and careful listening aim to make the customer feel that he is special among others.

Now that you are fully aware of what the customer wants, you can go ahead and create a customer service plans which fits your company. Here are some basic rules that will help you to frame a plan which is excellent as well as profitable to your company in the long run.

### **Know what your competitors are doing.**

When making a plan to provide the best customer service possible, the most important thing that you have to do is to find out what policies your competitors are following to satisfy their customers. In today's world, a lot of competition is faced by all businesses. So, if you want to stay in the market and be ahead of your competitors, you should be able to provide your customers with services that are much ahead in comparison to the

services provided by your competitors. How will you know whether your services are better than that provided by your competitors? In order to find the answer to this question, you have to find out exactly what services your competitors provide and also whether they are providing quality services. You can practice the following guidelines to get a clear idea about the services provided by your competitors.

1. Pay attention to the advertisements of your competitors. Most businesses advertise about their products/services in the television, radio and local newspaper. So, if you want to know about the services offered by your customers, pay attention to their advertisement. By reading their advertisements, you will be able to understand what kind of customers they are targeting at and what kind of services they plan to offer to their customers. You can use this information and can plan to provide much better services to your customers.
2. Regularly visit the website of your competitors. If you really want to provide your customers with services that are much ahead than what your competitors are providing, always remember to make frequent visits to the websites of your competitors. The websites of your competitors can provide you with a lot of information regarding their plans and strategies. You will also be able to get information about the kind of personnel who work for them. By getting this information, you can always plan to provide such services to your customers that are much better in comparison to that provided by your competitors.
3. Get information from your business colleagues. It may often happen that your business colleagues can provide you with information like the plans or strategies followed by your competitors. They may also be able to provide you information regarding any change in the customer services of your competitors.
4. Get information about your competitors from their customers. The best way to get information about your competitors is to enquire about their services from their customers. Only their customers can give you the exact picture about the quality of services that they provide. However, you should never hang around the stores of your competitors to get hold of their customers and enquire them about the services provided by your competitors. There is definitely a better way. It may often happen that some of your customers also use the services of your competitors. If you have a good rapport with these customers (and you should), you can get all relevant information about the quality of services provided by your competitors from them. It may even happen that you can come across the customers of your competitors in some social gathering and can get relevant information about the services provided by your competitors from them. However, when enquiring your competitor's customers about the services provided by them, make sure that they provide you concrete information and not vague answers like "their service is simply great". You will not be able to make out the quality of the services provided by your competitors from such vague statements. Eliminate the vague answers by asking more direct questions. By

getting relevant information about the services provided by your competitors, you can use it to plan a much better service for your customers.

5. Become a customer of your competitor. You can get a clear idea about the quality of services provided by your competitors by becoming a customer of them. By becoming their customers, you will understand what kind of services they provide. You will also get a clear idea as what kind of customers they are targeting. Most importantly, you will get to know what kind of treatment their customers get from them. Being in the same industry, this is a very good way to understand what policies are being followed by your competitors. By understanding their policies and getting relevant information about the quality of services provided by your competitors, you can design your services for your customers in such a way that they are much superior in comparison to the services of your competitors.
6. Sign up with your competitor's customer loyalty program. Many of your competitors may be providing their customers with customer loyalty programs or memberships. If you want to get information about the quality of services provided by your competitors, this is another avenue of approach. Being a member of their loyalty program will enable you to get relevant information as to what kind of bonuses they provide to their pioneer customers. Furthermore, you will also get information as to what extra services they provide to generate customer loyalty.

By now, you must have an idea as to what your competitors are doing to retain their customers. Once you get to know about the quality of your competitors services, you can design your services in such a way that they are much superior to the services provided by your competitors. However, apart from knowing what your competitors are doing, you should also abide by the following norms while developing your customer service plan.

- Be creative. While making a plan to provide your customers with the best customer service, learn to be creative. By being creative, you can easily handle or resolve any problem of your customer. All customer care professionals have to handle numerous customers daily and come across different demands of their customers. You may come across a situation when you are not able to cater to the demand of your customer. By being creative in such a situation, you can help your customers understand the reason for not being able to fulfill his demand. You can even prevent your customers from getting angry. By being creative, you can even calm down an angry or irate customer. Creativity will also help you to build a good rapport with your customers, which in the long run, will help you to provide superior service to your customers.
- Understand the wants and expectations of your customers. When making a plan to provide excellent customer service to your customers, you should understand

the requirements of your customers. You can provide efficient customer services only if you have a clear idea of what your customers want. You should always remember that the wants of different customers will be different. So, before providing your services to your customers, make sure that you have a good understanding to what they actually need. However, customers always have a lot of expectations from the customer service professionals. Your customers will always expect that you will provide them with prompt and efficient services. They expect that you will answer to their queries whenever they call you. So, if you want to provide the best services to your customers, you should try to fulfill the wants and expectations of your customers. By doing so, you will not only be providing your customers with efficient services, but will also be able to generate customer loyalty.

- Acknowledge the wants of your customers and empathize with them. By acknowledging the requirements of your customers, you make them feel that you understand their requirements or problems. This will make your customers feel that you are giving importance to their problems or needs. However, apart from acknowledging their problems, also remember to empathize with your customers. By empathizing, you make your customers feel that you understand their problem and are genuinely sorry for it. By empathizing, you can build an emotional rapport with your customers which will help in building good customer relation.
- Always ask probing questions. You should always ask probing questions, as it will help you to properly understand the requirements of your customers or what problems they are actually facing. However, when asking probing questions, always remember to use a simple language and not to use technical jargons. Limit your questions to one question at a time. By asking probing questions, you will be able to help your customers understand that you are trying to find out a solution for their problem. They will be assured that you have taken their problems seriously and not neglected them. They will realize that you consider them to be important. By asking probing questions you will be able to build customer loyalty.
- Make sure that you provide accurate and timely services. If your services are not in accordance to the need of your customers, it will be of no use to them. If you cannot provide timely services to your customer, you will be of value to him. Generally, customers do not like to wait to get a service. If you cannot provide a service on time, your customers may opt to get the same service from your competitors. Remember that the key to the success of customer service is to provide your services on time. If you fall behind, ensure you are in constant communication with your customer.
- Always show concern and courtesy. This goes hand-in-hand with empathizing with your customers. Being courteous and showing concern shows the customer that you consider them to be important and have genuine feeling for their issues and needs. Showing concern also adds the human touch to your services. Apart from showing concern, always remember to be courteous when dealing with your

customers. Always remember to greet your customers properly. Always remember that you should talk to your customers in a polite and friendly manner. By being courteous you can create a positive impact in the mind of your customers.

- Make sure you add a human touch. In today's business world, many companies have lost the human touch and in return have lost loyal customers. Always make sure that your customers get to hear a human voice whenever they call the customer service. Many organizations have gone to the automated attendant and one has to go through a number of menus before talking to a real person. How frustrating! When talking to your customer always try to speak in such a tone that shows that you are empathizing with your customer. Never sound mechanical to your customers as it will create a negative impact on your customers. If you are required to follow a script, ad lib at times to personalize your script.
- Always try to provide your customers with something extra. Go out of your way to provide your customers with some extra services. As a customer service professional, you should always try to provide something more than what your customers expect from you. Doing this you will make your customers feel special. They will feel that you consider them valuable for your business. They will keep on coming back to you and will always be eager to do business with you. Besides, your customers being delighted with your services will recommend you to their family and friends. Thus by doing something extra you are not able to create customer loyalty but will also be able to gain new customers for your business.

By now you must have a clear idea as to what points you should keep in mind when making a plan for providing customer services. These guidelines will not only help you to retain your customers by creating customer loyalty, but will also help you to gain new customers. So, what are you waiting for? Follow these simple guidelines and you will be providing excellent customer service to both your pioneer and new customers.

### **The 'I factor' to take note when creating your master plan for customer service**

The following tips on customer interaction can help you improve your service plan and standard.

*Inquire:* You can ask your customers about their needs. You need to know what they would like to be introduced by the company for them. Do not hesitate to ask them for inputs that you can implement.

*Interact:* As I have already told you, you can encourage your customers to open interaction events. These allow free and unbiased discussion between the two sides.

*Inform:* You can thereafter directly inform them regarding your services and offerings and the ways to get the most out of your offers.

*Iron out customer issues:* Make sure that everybody in your organization is treating the customers with the due respect and honor they deserve. Iron out any such problem irrespective of what the source is. This is what makes all the differences in customer's perception. If possible, go outside the rulebook and consider changing any policy that is not customer friendly by nature.

*Involve the customers:* You should try to involve the consumers to gain knowledge on the service quality they have received from the company workers. You can demonstrate what steps you are taking to make the policies more consumers friendly. Take their feedbacks regarding what could be improved in service standard.

*Inspire the workers:* Make your workers understand that they must treat the customers with respect. Train the workers accordingly if required. Guide them to behave with the customers in an assuring and friendly way. There are certain etiquettes that need to be used by the workers in addressing customers. Inspire everyone to develop a positive ambience in the workplace. The communication barrier should not exist.

*Introspect:* In order to exceed the quality of the standard, make personal analysis a regular habit. You need to locate why something did not work out properly. Then try analyzing how the mistakes could be avoided. You must use the data and customer surveys extensively. They can be used to make constructive changes in the customer policy. Keep asking the customers what they think about the performance of your company.

Remember to provide effective customer service you need to keep focus on instant solutions. See how quickly you and your staff can develop customized solutions for the customers within a short time frame. Check the mental competence of your workers and see how quickly they can provide a solution to an unforeseen customer problem. Equip your staff with adequate training so that they know what to do in case of an emergency problem. Always remember, prompt solution to a problem can make the customer happier than anything else.

### **Where you can go wrong**

As a customer service manager, you may ask me what kind of a service standard you are supposed to maintain in your organization. If you are wondering whether you should promise the customer that you will provide him with incredible service, my answer would be a stern "no". If a service by itself does not hold enough value to attract customers, the service provider should not resort to cheap gimmicks to sell it. That way you are sure to embrace failure soon.

My advice is that you do not offer your customer what is impossible for you! Making false promises for the sake of boosting up the revenue can cost you dearly. You need to know very clearly what your service is capable of providing the customers. You need to

match that with the amount the consumers are ready to pay. You also need to mention in your service agreement policy about the things that your services do not cover. It will save many problems later.

From my experience, I can tell you that the customers often do not understand the technical jargons and if you give a small hint, their service expectations can touch the sky. Then you may not be able to deliver that and the blame will be on you. You must have heard of the good old proverb that excess of anything is not good! This holds true for service standard management policies as well. Some people I know go over the board to keep the customer happy. I would advise you to refrain from that habit. In other words, do not promise the customer the moon if you can not fetch him that! When you promote the service of your company as ‘exceptional’, make sure that you have the means and provisions to deliver that. Otherwise you may end up paying through your nose.

You need to understand what your service is capable of delivering to the customer and if the consumers will find that viable or not. The customers may not always understand what your service manual means if you use vague terms like ‘exceptional service’, ‘comprehensive package’ etc. You need to mention very clearly what are the things that your service provides and what are the things it does not offer. A clear service agreement can save you and the customers from unforeseen problems in the long run.

I will give you an example of a friend of mine who used to run a Broadband Internet service in my neighborhood. That guy made tall claims in his brochures and leaflets and advertised heavily in the area. He managed to get some regional customers soon and started his venture happily. But soon he was plagued with numerous service related problems.

Whenever his staff went to fix some Internet related problems to the user’s places, they were asked to fix numerous non-Internet related computer problems including hardware. This was because the person promoted his service as an all-inclusive one and the users expected that he will be responsible for repairing any kind of computer problems. I think you get my point by now, don’t you?

If you are such a service provider, take your steps carefully. Be very clear about the contents of the package. If there are distinct provisions in each package, mention that as well. Never hide any limitation of the service from the users. For example, if your company provides broadband Internet at 256 kbps, 512 kbps and 1 mbps in three different schemes, you need to mention that in a way so that the readers are not confused. If you do not supply the modem, say that clearly in the brochure. Similarly if the modem is offered for rent, do not hide it from the advertisement material either. Also mention what additional services you can arrange for extra charges and exactly how much amount the users have to pay for that.

***TRUNCATED VERSION***