

Introduction to Customer Service

Customer service is all around us. Most of us engage in customer service activities of some type during our normal daily routines at work. All of us encounter customer service when we go to the store, call a company on the phone, or visit a business's web site. However, simply being exposed to customer service doesn't mean you understand how to do it well or how to evaluate whether you are receiving an acceptable level of customer service. The point of this course is to help you understand what customer service is and how to make it better whether you do it for a living or deal with it at a consumer-level.

What Is Customer Service?

When we think about customer service, the first idea that pops into our heads is probably the call center operator or the service employee. These are the people we come to when we need help fixing a problem or when we have questions about a purchase. While they do represent part of what customer is, they don't make up the whole picture.

The term customer service actually means “making sure customers are satisfied and will continue to buy products or services of a company.”¹ That definition means that everyone and anyone who has any contact with the customer, including salespeople, business owners, and receptionists are all customer service representatives. Customer service becomes more complex when you recognize that there are two types of customers: external and internal. External customers are consumers who purchase goods and services from a business. Internal customers are the people who work for that business or who do business with that company. Employees and vendors both deserve good service. Customer service representatives, whether they work with external or internal customers, do more than answer questions. They also provide technical assistance, protect customers' privacy, provide customers with products and/or services which meet their needs, and ensure that customers feel they are getting good value for their money. In order to appreciate and understand customer service, it's important to realize all of the distinctions above.

Why Customer Service is Important

We've all been in a situation where we've been unhappy with the service we've received. Maybe our waiter wasn't attentive enough. Maybe a salesperson was too pushy. Maybe the representative didn't answer our questions clearly. Whatever the situation, we all know that those experiences leave us feeling angry, bitter, and cheated. We definitely don't want to do business with those establishments again; we might even warn our friends and family not to do business with them either.

¹ Rokes, Beverly. *Customer Service*. Cincinnati, OH: South-Western Educational Publishing, 2002.

Obviously, we know that customer service is important because too many negative experiences are going to cause a serious loss of customers and revenue for a business. Those losses would eventually lead to a going-out-of-business sale.

What we may not realize is that there are specific characteristics that we look for in the people who are helping to serve us. When these characteristics are present, we are more likely to have a satisfactory experience. Here is a list of those characteristics:

- Good product and industry knowledge – We want someone who knows what they are talking about
- Friendliness – We want someone who makes us feel comfortable and who seems to eager to assist us
- Knowledge of our needs – We want someone who understands what we need so that they can help us fill that need
- Problem-solving skills – We want someone who can help us find solutions

The interesting thing about these characteristics is that most of them cannot be taught. Training may provide workers with information about the products or the industry, but it can't turn an anti-social loner into a people person. Many companies forget this fact. Those that do learn the hard way that effective customer service begins with the hiring process. Good employees lead to good customers.

Customer Service – Worksheet

Directions: Below are some questions related to the article on Customer Service. The group that is assigned this topic should complete the answers and be prepared to present them to the class. Relate your answers back to the article whenever possible to make this a lesson. ☺

1. Think about a recent customer service experience – either positive or negative. Write a brief summary of that experience. Now think about those four characteristics we look for in customer service representatives. How did the representative in your example stack up?
2. Consider a specific school or workplace. Who would be the external customers for that organization? Who would be the internal customers?
3. Reports have shown that customer service satisfaction has dropped significantly in recent years. Experts have offered up a wide-range of explanations for this trend. Based on your own customer service experience, what do you think is the reason(s)? Explain your answer and give examples.
4. In customer service, there are two roles representatives can take. One is reactive and one is proactive. The reactive role involves dealing with a situation when it develops, such as solving a customer's complaint. A proactive role involves taking preventative action, such as introducing a product to meet a customer need. Give a real-life example for both types of roles.
5. You're working with a new employee at a clothing boutique. A customer comes in with a complaint about the shirt she purchased the day before. When she asks the new employee to assist her, the employee replies, "I'm sorry. That's not my job." Was the employee's reaction acceptable? What do you need to tell her about handling similar situations in the future? How could this situation have been prevented in the first place?