

# CUSTOMER SERVICE TIPS

*David E. Hartl*

## **TIPS FOR FACE-TO-FACE CUSTOMER CONTACTS**

- ◆ **Be both physically and psychologically “present” when a customer arrives for service; be ready to provide service. KEEP IN MIND THE FACT THAT THE CUSTOMER IS THE PRIMARY REASON YOU ARE THERE.**
- ◆ **Treat the customer as a friendly person; smile and tell them your name; offer to shake their hand if circumstances are appropriate for that; get their name and use it throughout the contact.**
- ◆ **Use active listening techniques.**
  - ◇ Listen to the customer’s entire description or request; avoid interrupting even when it appears obvious to you that you already know what they want.
  - ◇ Write down the customer’s key points to assure accuracy and refer to them when you are ready to respond.
  - ◇ Check to be sure you understood the customer’s intended message before you respond to it. (Say something like: “OK. I think I’ve got all of your points. The first thing you need from us is..., is that correct?”)
  - ◇ If what the customer wants is not clear to you, ask them to provide more background information so you can *help them figure out* what they might need. Go beyond simply reacting to their requests; be proactive in helping to solve their problem.
  - ◇ Double-check all essential facts about the customer (e.g. spelling of name and company name; address and telephone information; account, customer, invoice, or other relevant numbers they have received; exact types of services or products they need; what forms, permits, or approvals they need or have already received; and other information that will make identifying, tracking, or following their case easier and more accurate).
  - ◇ If you don’t know the information that the customer needs, offer to find it for them or take them to where they can find it easily for themselves.
  - ◇ Beware of stereotypes (male/female; young/old; ethnic; language; racial; etc.) and the capacity of stereotypes to shade attitudes and performance. Counter the effects of stereotypes by maintaining a singular focus on the special needs and wants of the particular individual customer whom you are presently helping.
  - ◇ Avoid distractions and other lapses in concentration while working with the customer; don’t take extraneous phone calls or get drawn away by the questions imposed by others.

## **TIPS FOR TELEPHONE CUSTOMER CONTACTS**

- ◆ **Respond to telephone calls effectively.**
  - ◇ Answer on the second or third ring every time.
  - ◇ Greet the caller courteously and with a smile in your voice.
  - ◇ Identify yourself to the caller.

- ◇ Handle messages accurately and completely; double-check to be sure information is correct.
  - ◇ Make telephone line transfers efficiently; provide a callback number just in case.
  - ◇ Alert the caller when you are going to put them on hold; check to be sure they have been assisted.
- ◆ **Use an effective telephone style.**
- ◇ Your voice is neither too soft nor too loud.
  - ◇ You speak your words clearly and completely.
  - ◇ The pace of your talk makes it easy to get every word.
  - ◇ Your voice is vibrant, interested, pleasant, and enthusiastic when appropriate.

### **TIPS FOR WRITTEN CONTACTS WITH CUSTOMERS**

- ◆ **Be clear about why you are writing to the customer.**
- ◇ To specify and/or clarify information.
  - ◇ To confirm and document an agreement or mutual understanding.
  - ◇ To create a “paper record” of a transaction.
  - ◇ To build or strengthen the relationship.
- ◆ **Use professional standards for all written customer contacts.**
- ◇ Use official letterhead whenever writing on official business or for professional purposes.
  - ◇ Type your letter on standard 8 1/2 x 11 paper so it fits into standard envelopes, ordinary fax and copy machines, regular file folders, and in-baskets.
  - ◇ Make sure the letter is neat and readable; on one page if possible.
  - ◇ State your purpose in the first or second paragraph; fill in the background and details later.
  - ◇ Be brief.
  - ◇ Use the first person “I” rather than “we” and write conversationally.
  - ◇ Avoid bureaucratic language or phrasing as well as technical jargon unless you know the reader is also technically familiar.
  - ◇ Spellcheck and proofread everything before it goes into the mail.
- ◆ **Clearly indicate if and how you want the reader to respond to your letter.**
- ◇ What do they need to do? By when? Anyone in particular? Where?
  - ◇ Indicate who else received a copy of the letter and who else should receive a reply.

### **TIPS FOR WHEN SOMETHING GOES WRONG**

- ◆ **Be honest about mistakes**
- ◇ People have a way of finding out the truth anyway, so get there first.
  - ◇ Most people understand it isn't a perfect world and will respect honesty in taking responsibility.
  - ◇ Being honest helps you feel good about yourself, the one person you can never lie to successfully.

- ◆ **Recover the customer's satisfaction with extraordinary responses to extraordinary errors.**
  - ◇ Take ownership of and responsibility for the problem (even when it is a little questionable that it was your organization's fault).
  - ◇ Avoid accepting blame even while accepting responsibility for fixing the problem.
  - ◇ Listen, listen, listen, listen to the customer's complaint. Wait to speak until it is absolutely clear that they have said all they want to say. (Get comfortable with being silent for long periods, offering only occasional "uh-huh's," while they vent.)
  - ◇ Find out how the customer was actually injured or damaged by the problem or mistake; discover any inconvenience or expense they were subject to because of the error.
  - ◇ When it is clear that you understand the situation and are ready to take corrective action, offer these three things:
    - An apology sincerely given and felt.
    - Offer something that will at least try to "make it up to the customer" for having been inconvenienced or injured.
    - A promise to fix the situation that created the problem in the first place.
- ◆ **Follow-through on delivery of what you said you are going to do to "make it up to the customer."**
- ◆ **Follow-through with the customer to make sure their problem has been completely fixed and their satisfaction has been fully recovered.**
- ◆ **Follow-through with your organization's system and staff to make sure that the reason for the problem no longer exists.**

## **TIPS FOR DEALING WITH OBNOXIOUS CUSTOMERS**

- ◆ **Be sure it's the customer that's being obnoxious.**
  - ◇ Check-out your own mood and state of mind. If you're upset, it probably shows in your unconscious behavior and it can trigger an upset response in others, including customers.
  - ◇ Go away for a few minutes and relax by deep breathing and focus; get a grip; then return to the customer and fully focus on the customer's issues. It's *performance time* at work.
- ◆ **Get perspective and distance from the obnoxious behavior.**
  - ◇ Avoid taking it personally. They are probably not upset with you as a person.
  - ◇ Observe the customer's obnoxious behavior as something that is happening "out there," on a movie screen, in a theater, or at a circus. Say to yourself, "This is interesting."
  - ◇ Look past the obnoxious behavior and focus on fixing the customer's problem.
- ◆ **Set your limit for taking verbal abuse and tolerating obnoxious behavior from a customer.**
  - ◇ You are not required to tolerate profanity or physical abuse from any customer. It's OK to tell them so and politely excuse yourself from the situation or hang up the phone.
  - ◇ Immediately report what you did and why to your supervisor; document the event if necessary.