

Excerpt from:

Customer Service Training 101, Second Edition

By Renee Evenson

Chapter One

Taking Your First Steps: The Basics

“Always remember, the customer is the reason you have a job.”

What has happened to customer service? More often than not, customers are met with boredom, indifference, and even rudeness or condescension. When they are greeted with a friendly smile, they are thrilled. When they are approached with a helpful attitude, they are likely to tell their friends. When they get good service, they are grateful. Customers should never have to feel grateful for being treated well. Being treated well should be the standard.

Think, for a moment, about your own interactions as a customer. In the past few days, how many times were you a customer? Did you go to the grocery store or the mall? Did you visit the post office, doctor’s office, bank, dry cleaners, or your child’s school? Did you eat any meals out? Did you call a company to ask a question or visit a Web site and order products online?

You probably were a customer more times than you realized. And as a customer, you have choices. How many stores are in your mall? How many doctors are in your phone book? How many restaurants are nearby? How easy is it to place an order by phone or online? If you are not happy with the service at one business, you have options. You can go elsewhere.

As a service provider, keep in mind that your customers have the same choices you do. If they are not happy with the way you treat them, they can go elsewhere.

How you treat your customers does matter. Think again about your own interactions as a customer. Which ones stand out in your mind? You are likely to remember service that is either outstanding or awful. Mediocre service is soon forgotten.

Customer Service is the Basics

We are going to take our first steps with the basics because:

The Basics Are the Basis of Customer Service.

A favorable first impression gets your customer service off on the right foot. You begin providing service the moment a customer comes into your business, calls you on

the telephone, or e-mails you. When customers physically walk through your door, they take a mental snapshot of you and your surroundings. Without even thinking, they form a first impression. First impressions are also formed over the telephone and through online contact. How you speak, how well you listen, the words you choose, and how you write and respond using e-mail all contribute to first impressions. If a customer's first impression is favorable, you have laid the foundation for providing great customer service. If the first impression is not favorable, you will have to dig deeper to begin building your foundation.

Being courteous promotes a positive first impression. Customers appreciate courteous treatment. As young children, we learned basic courtesies: to say "please" and "thank you"; to pay attention and not to interrupt when other people speak; to treat others with respect; to play fairly; to say "I'm sorry." As adults, we sometimes forget how important these words and actions are. Courtesy words, phrases, and behaviors contain powerful messages. They show you care.

A positive attitude fosters a good first impression. Customers appreciate a positive attitude. A great attitude can help overcome a poor first impression. Similarly, a negative attitude can destroy a favorable first impression.

Being truthful and acting in an ethical manner completes the picture of the first impressions you make. Honesty is always the best policy. When you follow through on commitments and stay accountable for your actions, you show your customers that you value them and that they can rely on you to do the right thing.

By combining a favorable first impression, courteous treatment, a positive attitude, and ethical behaviors, you form the basis for a strong customer service foundation. Add effective communication skills, and you will be on your way to building long-lasting relationships with your customers. Once you master these customer service basics, learn how to effectively communicate, and develop skills to build strong relationships, you will confidently handle any customer in any situation.

Picture This ...

The Wrong Way to Provide Basic Service

Sally drove to Bob's Electronics store to look for a new television set. She walked in and spotted two employees stocking DVD players on a display rack. They were laughing and joking with each other as they worked. Neither looked at her. Neither asked if she needed help. She asked if they carry television sets. Without looking up, one of the employees said, "Yeah, they're over there," pointing as he answered. She wandered over to the television sets. With so many new types from which to choose, she was confused and did not know what she wanted. She noticed the employees were still joking around. Sally waited a few moments and when neither one paid attention to her, she walked out of the store.

What Went Wrong?

Sally did not form a favorable first impression of the employees at Bob's Electronics Store. Neither stopped what they were doing to help her. Neither was courteous. They could have changed her first impression by projecting an attitude that they cared about her as a customer and by taking the time to help her.

How Did the Customer Feel?

Sally was dissatisfied with the way she was treated. It appeared to her that the employees considered stocking shelves and talking to each other were more important than helping her. Sally felt that her business simply did not matter to Bob's employees. Since she did not care for the way she was treated, Sally left without doing business with them.

When you work with customers continuously, it is easy to begin taking them for granted, but taking customers for granted is never acceptable. When you do, you stop caring about how you treat them. Eventually, you may view customers as intruders who take you away from your work. This was the view Bob's employees projected. To them, stocking shelves and talking to each other were more important. If you do not treat your customers well, you may soon have no customers.

Customers, on the other hand, have been conditioned to expect mediocre service. Customers who are given mediocre service will have mediocre attitudes about the business. When customers are valued and treated with courtesy and respect, they are more apt to do repeat business with you. Remember the important lesson you learned as a child: Always treat others the way you want to be treated. Treat others well, and they are more likely to treat you well.

Mastering the basics is simple once you learn and practice the four steps below. Then you will begin to build a firm foundation for providing great customer service.

Step One: First Impressions Matter

Step Two: Courtesy Counts

Step Three: Attitude is Everything

Step Four: Doing the Right Thing: Ethical Issues

If Bob's employees treated Sally better, she would not have walked out of the store. She left because they did not value her as a customer. They did not lay a foundation for giving great customer service.

Step One: **First Impressions Matter**

First impressions are mental snapshots you take when you first encounter a person or situation. They include a person's looks and actions: general grooming and cleanliness, clothing, tone of voice, attitude, body language, and posture. Together, these elements make up an individual's personal style. First impressions do matter. They matter a lot.

When Sally took her mental snapshot at Bob's, it did not develop well. Even if the

employees were well dressed, had neat hair, and wore clean clothes, their lack of courtesy and poor attitudes spoke volumes. When they ignored Sally, they told her loudly and clearly that they did not value her as a customer.

Appearance Is the First Thing Customers Notice About You

The first step to making a good first impression is your appearance. An unappealing appearance can be an obstacle that blocks customers from forming a positive first impression. You may have to sacrifice your personal style to please others, but your appearance at work needs to fit your business. Otherwise, you may have to work harder for your customers to become comfortable with you.

Wear Appropriate Clothing for the Type of Work You Do

Wear the type of clothing that fits the character of your business. If you work in a five-star restaurant, you will dress quite differently than if you work in a fast food restaurant. When in doubt, always lean toward dressing conservatively. Save your party clothes for parties. Save your torn jeans and old tees for hanging out with friends. No matter what type of clothes you wear to work, you do not have to spend a fortune on your wardrobe. Wearing well-fitted and appropriate clothes will go a long way toward presenting yourself successfully. It does not matter how much you spend; what matters most is how your clothes fit you and your environment.

Make Sure You Are Groomed

Being groomed means your hair and fingernails are clean and neat; your face, body, and teeth are clean; your clothes are clean and pressed; your shoes are polished; your hair is styled; and your overall image is professional. Put all that together, and you present a groomed look. If you do not have a full-length mirror, buy one. Look in it every day before you leave home.

Maintain a Relaxed and Open Demeanor

You can wear nice clothes, be clean and groomed, yet still convey a negative first impression. Your body language counts as much as your grooming. Whether you present an angry, bored, or friendly demeanor, it shows. Hold your head high, and keep your facial expressions friendly. Make eye contact when talking with someone. And smile as often as appropriate. A smile goes a long way in establishing a good interpersonal relationship. When you smile, you feel better. When you smile, you make others feel better.

Doing these three things will help your customers form a positive first impression of you. Doing these three things shows that you care about yourself.

Picture This ...
The Right Way to Make a Great First Impression

Sally drove to Bob's Electronics Store to purchase a new television set. She walked in and spotted two employees stocking DVDs on a display rack. They were dressed nicely and looked happy, laughing and joking with each other while they worked. They looked at her, smiled, and said, "Welcome to Bob's." The employees were well groomed, and their body language conveyed the message that they cared about themselves. Their smiles conveyed the message that they cared about her. Sally smiled back and said she was looking for a new television.

How Did the Customer Feel?

This time Sally's mental snapshot was developing nicely. The employees made a great first impression because they stopped what they were doing to greet her.

Step Two:
Courtesy Counts

Young children are praised for doing and saying the right things. When a young child says "please" and "thank you," people respond positively. When a young child says "I'm sorry," people readily accept the apology. When children wait to speak without interrupting, people notice how well mannered they are. When children learn how to play well, people comment. Children who receive positive reinforcement develop valuable skills for getting along with others.

As an adult, you are not going to receive constant praise for being courteous, but people will appreciate these behaviors. When you act courteously, you send a positive and powerful message. When you make a conscious effort to use courtesy words and phrases, they will soon become a natural part of your vocabulary and personality.

Say Please, Thank You, and You're Welcome

We were taught these words as young children, and they were reinforced frequently. Do you remember being prompted, "What do you say?" Do you remember responding with "please" or "thank you" or "you're welcome"? Pay attention to your internal prompts. Make it a habit to incorporate these words into your vocabulary and use them frequently.

Use Sir and Ma'am

Using these words shows a sign of respect. When you call a person sir or ma'am, be careful how you accentuate these words. The wrong emphasis can make you sound sarcastic or condescending. The right emphasis can make you sound respectful, no matter your age or your customer's age.

Use a Person's Name When You Know It

Everyone enjoys hearing his or her name, so if you know your customer's name, use it. Also be sure to give the customer your name.

Use Yes Rather Than Yeah

"Yes" sounds professional, intelligent, and respectful. Period. Save "yeah" for personal conversations. Better yet, get into the habit of always using "yes."

Say It With a Smile

This is an old saying with a timely meaning. In our speed-of-light-paced world, smiling when you speak does come across loud and clear. Whether you are speaking face to face or by telephone, your customers will see or hear the smile in your voice.

Common courtesies include things you should not do in the presence of customers, including talking on a personal call, smoking, eating (or having food at your work station), and chewing gum.

Picture This ...

The Right Way to Incorporate Basic Courtesies

Sally smiled back at the two employees and said, "I'm looking for a new television, but there are so many new types I really don't know what I'm looking for. Can you help me?"

"Yes ma'am. My name is Jeff, and I'll be happy to help you," said one of the employees as he smiled warmly and walked toward her. "Let me show you what we have." He walked with her to the television sets.

How Did the Customer Feel?

Jeff was courteous and Sally felt that he truly cared about helping her.

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