

# Customer Service - Introduction

Customer is the king because he keeps every business afloat. Whether an organization offers a product or service, it cannot remain in business if it cannot find a group of people willing to become its customers. In this tutorial, we will discuss how we can keep every customer – existing or potential – happy and satisfied so that business flourishes.



## Who Are Customers?

Anyone who is provided with a good, product, service or idea is a customer. Financial transactions may or may not be a part of this provision, which brings us to the two types of customers –

- Internal Customers
- External Customers

### Internal Customers

A customer directly connected with the organization is called an internal customer. Usually, internal customer is part of the organization, like stakeholders, employees, departments or shareholders.

**For example**, every product has a user manual or user instructions associated with it. To develop these a content development team or department is created, which has to provide the material to the packaging department. Now packaging department would be the internal customer of the content development team.

## External Customers

A customer who is external to the organization is called an external customer. **For example**, anyone buying a refrigerator, designer suit or software is a customer of the company manufacturing it.

The concept of internal customers was introduced in 1988 by Joseph M Juran, a quality management writer. Since then this concept has become essential to ensuring organization wide total quality management. It is also believed that an organization that is able to satisfy its internal customers is better equipped to satisfy external customers.

## What Is Customer Service?

Taking care of a customer's needs and solving their problems is called customer service. Customer service begins the moment you connect with the customer to fulfill his needs and continues even after the requirements are met. The services might be required before, during and after the customer purchases a product or service.



## Customer Service Characteristics

A high quality customer service can be provided by incorporating these characteristics –

- **Being prompt** – Whatever service or product you have promised the customer, be punctual in its fulfilment. Changes or cancellations later in the day can be harmful to you and your organization's reputation.

- **Knowing your P's and Q's** – You must be polite to your customer all the time. Besides the opening and closing greetings, dot your conversation with please, sir, thank you or sorry liberally. Display your best behavior to every customer.
- **Being professional** – Show empathy for your customer's problems while respecting them. Never make them feel demeaned because they have a problem they cannot solve by themselves.
- **Striking a personal chord** – You should try to establish a personal equation with the customer. A personal touch like calling the customer by name can earn you his loyalty.
- **Listening attentively** – Never interrupt the customer when he is explaining his requirement. Make a note of salient points and request for clarifications later.
- **Asking right questions** – If you have listened to the customer requirements attentively and you have thorough knowledge of your product or service, you should be able to ask the right questions that will help you in meeting customer needs.
- **Taking responsibility** – You should feel personally responsible for solving the customer's queries. Never assume that you are just a representative of the team and hence onus of the service lies with the whole team.

## Good Customer Service Department

Anyone providing customer service can only be as good as the supporting team or department. It is essential to have a good customer service department to provide world class service. These are some of the features of a good customer service department.

- **Repository of customer problems** – Every customer service department should have a list of customer FAQs as well as most recurrent problems. Care should be taken to update it periodically with latest queries and requests.
- **Clear-cut procedures** – Procedures for recording customer request and steps taken to solve them must be laid down unambiguously.
- **Robust customer service tracking program** – The software being used to track service requests should record, process and make available all requests to all the team members. This will enable seamless service even in absence of any team member. Software should also be able to analyse requests and create reports.
- **Intensive training program** – Customer service team members should have continuous training after the initial induction to keep them up-to-date with products and services as well as customer request trends.

## Who Are Customer Service Providers?

Any person, department or organization that takes customer requests, processes them, addresses their concerns, solves problems and acts as an interface on behalf of the company is called a customer service provider.

Customer service providers may be of these categories –

- **In-house providers** – Small companies can have in-house employees to take care of customer needs. Care should be taken so that service standard do not go down due to lack of dedicated resources.
- **Third party providers** – Big organizations usually outsource their customer service to companies that specialize in it. The processes followed by the outsourced company is subject to close monitoring by the principal company.
- **Independent providers** – People or firm who provide customer service through their own methods without any supervision are called independent providers. Employing independent customer service providers is a hassle-free way of outsourcing customer service function.

Whatever the type of customer service provider, these are some common characteristics they must have to provide high-quality service –

- Commitment to provide high quality customer service should be part of mission statement.
- Everyone should have measurable customer service goals.
- Regular feedbacks from customers must be taken and their suggestions incorporated.
- Recurring customer problems must be identified and fixed, if possible.

It is always advisable that the higher management solicits suggestions from customer-facing employees to improve customer experience.

## Customer Service - Attitude

When dealing with customers you should remember that first impression is the last impression. If the first time a customer interacts with you and is not satisfied, you will not get a second chance. You might have lost the company a customer. To ensure you are first time lucky every time, you need to embrace the correct attitude.

A customer service associate may interact with a customer in these ways –

- Through internet/e-mail

- Via telephone
- Face to face

Whatever the mode of interaction, the associate must display a positive attitude to the customer. Let us discuss some steps that can be taken to impress and connect with the customer.

## Appearance Matters!

Good appearance, comprising the clothes you wear, your voice, smile on your face, sitting or standing posture, etc., makes one more confident. And when you sound or look confident you have better chances of impressing and influencing a customer.



If you regularly have customers walking to your desk, you should keep your work desk uncluttered and always dress up smartly. If you give a feeling of being unclean and unorganized to your customers, they will find it difficult to believe that you are capable of solving their problems. Even if the two are completely unrelated.

If you interact with your customers via mail or voice call, you will feel more confident and hence be able to impress them as a consummate professional. Even if the customer cannot see you, he will be more willing to take your words at face value.

## Wear a Smile, Always

Smile increases not only your face value but the quality of your voice too. Here is a small exercise for you. Speak the same sentence with and without a smile and note the difference. Smiling makes your voice sound happy, which will make you more popular among your customers.

If the customer walks up to you, always smile and talk. The person who approached will feel more welcome and more forthcoming on his problems.



Even if you deal with customer problems through mails or telephone calls, make it a point to keep smiling always, whether you are replying to a mail or talking with a customer.

## Stay Positive and Energized

Handling different customers day in and day out can be a monotonous as well as frustrating experience. Never let that show in your dealings. Be it writing a mail, talking through phone, or discussing in person, you should always radiate energy and feel positive.

Here are some tips to stay positive and energized –

- Take regular breaks to stretch your legs as well as boost blood circulation.
- If you are continuously in front of the monitor, let your eyes take a break every 5- 10 minutes.
- Eat healthy snacks to prevent fatigue from setting in

Customers engage better with people who exude confidence and positive vibes. And an engaged customer is a loyal customer.

## Understanding Customer's Problem

As someone responsible for handling customers, you should know when to listen and when to speak. This will enable you to understand the problem, the first step in solving any problem.

## Meeting Basic Needs

These are the basic steps in understanding a customer's problems –

- Listen patiently to what the customer has to say
- Write down all that is being said
- Don't interrupt if you have a query; note it down
- Once the customer has finished narrating his problem, summarize your understanding from your notes
- Add to the notes you have taken if the customer has anything more or different to say

After understanding the problem, you should immediately decide whether you will be able to solve the problem or need to escalate. Whatever your conclusion, assure the customer politely and convincingly that his problem will be solved.

## Thinking Out of the Box

Having a problem-solving attitude is essential for a customer service associate. As most customers are inarticulate, out-of-the-box thinking is crucial to solve the problems. Also, even after the problem has been defined, it is not necessary that it has a straightforward solution. You may have to approach the problem from a unique way that has not been tried earlier.

Here are some scenarios where you may need to be innovative to offer a solution –

- Not covered specifically in company or department guideline
- Information needs to be gathered from another department
- Customer is pushy and wants you to solve immediately
- Customer has already made complaints that were not resolved



## Going the Extra Mile

Every customer service department has a set of laid down norms, usually written. These norms or rules are there to –

- Define a team member's responsibilities
- Establish protocols for inter-departmental communication
- Outline what a team member is not required to do

These guidelines are for safeguarding your professional interests. However, no one will stop you from going an extra mile to help a customer. In fact, as the face of your organization, you should do everything in your power to solve a customer's problems. Even if it means doing something you are not strictly required to do.

A satisfied customer is the best publicity any organization can have. Plus, a satisfied customer will become loyal too, buying your products every time a need arises rather than look for other options.



# Customer Service - Generating Business

Customer service associates are the people who deal directly with existing and potential customers. So by providing good service, they can assist in generating business. Let us see how.

## Upselling and Cross Selling

Even after a customer has made a purchase or made up her mind, it is possible to upsell or cross sell. The technique of encouraging a customer to buy more expensive item, upgrade a product or service, or opt for product add-ons is called **upselling**. For example, in a bookstore, the customer can be persuaded to buy hardcover rather than paperback edition, or other books by the same author, thereby increasing the purchase value.

The technique of persuading a customer to buy a related or complimenting product is called **cross selling**. Taking forward the previous example of a book store, a customer can be encouraged to buy books by other authors but in the same genre.

## How to Follow Up

Once a purchase has been made, you should not forget the customer because there is always a possibility of upselling or cross selling. But before you do that you must nurture a relationship with the customer.

Here are some tips for establishing and nurturing a relationship with the customer –

- Call up to check on customer's progress after purchase of product or service
- Set up your database to send birthday and anniversary greetings
- Send an occasional snail mail as surprise element
- Send personalized thank you note

## How to Address Complaints

There are four steps in addressing a customer complaint and delivering world-class customer service. These are as follows –

### **Understand the Problem**

You must patiently listen to what the customer has to say and understand her problem.

## Reiterate What You have Understood

Repeat to the customer what you have understood, so that both of you are on the same plane and there is no misunderstanding.

## Resolve the Problem

Solve the problem to the customer's satisfaction. Closure of the problem must be there from the customer's end.

## Thank the Customer

Always thank the customer for giving you the chance to help him. Remember, it goes a long way in building brand value. Also, if the customer had given up on your service or product without trying to resolve, you would have lost valuable customer.

# Customer Service - In-Person

You know that there are three ways in which you can provide customer service –

- In-person or at-your-desk
- Telephone
- E-mail or chat

Here we will discuss about providing in-person customer service.

## Dealing with At-Your-Desk Requests

Thumb rule of dealing with at-your-desk requests is never to turn a customer away. Whether it is an internal customer or external customer, you should never ever ask the person to come again just because you are busy. However busy you are, whatever the importance level of your task, being a customer service professional means that dealing with customers has to be your first priority.

When you receive an e-mail or a chat request, you can postpone responding to it if you are too busy, however, in case of at-your-desk request you don't have that luxury. So you should develop mechanisms that assist you in shifting focus from one task to another without losing concentration.

## Pros and Cons of At-Your-Desk Requests

Every coin has two sides. Even if handling at-your-desk requests might seem annoying, it has its own advantages –

- You get the opportunity to establish a relationship with the customer directly
- You can get your queries resolved on the spot

- If the customer is happy with your personality and behavior, your chances of satisfying him increases manifold

These are some of the disadvantages of at-your-desk requests –

- You have to attend to the customer immediately
- In case of a difficult customer the situation could deteriorate fast
- If you need time to solve the problem, you will have to clearly tell the customer this

## Using Positive Body Language

Besides your words, your body language conveys your intent to the person you are speaking to. When handling a customer, you should be mindful of your body language.

Here are some tips to using a positive body language with customers –

- Stop doing whatever you are doing and maintain eye contact with the customer
- Nod at them after they have said something of importance
- Sit erect without your shoulders drooping
- Use positive hand movements and gestures
- Never allow an expression of boredom to creep on your face even if you have heard similar complaints many times

Your body language should always convey positive and good intentions. This will induce the customer to have more confidence in you.

## Customer Service - Over Phone

Telephone is one of the most popular modes of getting as well as providing customer service. Besides at-your-desk requests, telephone is the most personal medium of interaction between customers and customer service department. Here we will discuss about the various aspects of conducting successful customer service over the phone.

## Telephone Communication Etiquette

Following basic telephone etiquettes when talking to customers is the right way to establish good relationship. Some of the etiquettes that you must adopt are –

- Answer calls promptly
- Start the conversation with a greeting

- Try to solve the problem without having to transfer the call or put it on hold
- Always ask the customer for permission before transferring or holding his call
- Thank the customer at the end of the conversation



## Essential Skills for Telephone Communication

Like any communication, telephone conversations should be clear, concise, and correct. To ensure this, you should follow these guidelines –

- **Smile genuinely** – Smile when you are talking into the phone. The customer may not see you smile but definitely hear it and know that you are happy to assist.
- **Sound honest** – Be honest in your conversations so that the customer can start believing in your ability to solve his problems. Never promise something that you will not be able to do.
- **Use correct tone and pitch** – The tone and pitch of your voice can convey your level of engagement to the customer. Never try to multi-task while handling a customer, assuming that he will never get to know. Involving your mind in something else will change your voice too.
- **Use customer's name** – Address the caller by name to foster a friendly atmosphere. However never overdo it and ask for permission before using a first name.

- **Leave the customer happy** – Never terminate the conversation when the client is sounding dissatisfied. It's the last few moments of the call that the customer is likely to remember, so try to leave the customer on a satisfied note.

## Paying Attention

It is natural for your attention to stray while you are having a telephone conversation.

These are some common causes of misplaced attention during a telephone conversation –

- Something in the surroundings might catch your eye
- Background noise
- Disturbed telephone line

These are some ways you can ensure undivided attention during telephone calls –

- Ensure peaceful environment
- Do not do anything else while you are on the call
- Take notes so that your eyes or mind do not stray to anything else

A distraction may be only for a couple of seconds but you might miss out on important information. So never try to gloss over it. Apologize to the customer and ask him to repeat whatever he was saying. Most of the customers will not mind doing that as long as they can be sure that you are not missing out on any information. It might irritate some but still they will be glad you asked for it again rather than missing out completely. However, it is best not to let this happen at all.

## Customer Service - Difficult Customers

A customer unwilling to listen to what you have to say is a **difficult** customer. The unwillingness to listen could be due to anger, frustration, impatience, indecisiveness or talkativeness.

Remember that you can never offer a solution to an angry or frustrated customer. You can never offer a solution to an angry or frustrated customer. So your first priority when dealing with difficult customers is to calm them down.



Here is a list of some of the ways you can take to calm the angry customers down

- Listen to the complaint patiently
- Never interrupt the customer
- Allow the customer to vent her anger or frustration completely
- Remain calm and control your own feelings
- Be polite and at your best behavior

## Setting Your Limits

As a customer service professional you will have to frequently deal with customers who are difficult to handle in some way or the other. To maintain your professionalism at all times, know your limits to dealing with difficult customers. These limits could be set according to level of complexity of the problem, degree of hostility from the customer or time duration for which you have been dealing with the same customer.

Once you know your limits, it is important to convey this to your colleagues as well as supervisor. This will enable them to judge the right time to intervene.

## Understand When to Escalate

When dealing with difficult customers, do not get carried away. Be aware of your conversation and actions dispassionately, without emotions. This will help you recognize when you need to escalate the problem to your supervisor or someone higher up. Here are some reasons when you should escalate –

- You have crossed your personal limit of handling a difficult customer
- Someone else has more experience in dealing with such scenario
- The customer insists on talking with someone else or more senior

Remember that as long as you have done all you could do, escalation does not mean that you have failed in doing your job. Customer service is a team effort and the team as a whole should be able to satisfy each customer.

## Dealing with Vulgarity

As a customer service professional you can expect to come across vulgar customers too. If the vulgarity is on mail, you can choose to ignore it. However, if you are forced to give a response, keep these points in mind –

- Problem lies with the customer, not you
- Politely but firmly request the customer to stop his behavior immediately
- If you feel unable to handle and there is no one else to step in, you can terminate the conversation after informing the customer
- Flag the customer in the database so that if he calls again, the person handling him will be prepared

## Coping with Insults

Never take any insult personally. Remember that you are a representative of the company and the customer also treats you as such. In case of e-mail, you can simply choose to ignore the mail. But in telephonic, chat or face-to-face scenario you have to respond. Here are some tips to guide you through such situation –

- Be polite but firm in requesting the customer to stop verbal abuse
- Never retaliate with insult or get angry
- If you feel unable to handle and there is no one else to step in, you can terminate the conversation after informing the customer

## Dealing with Legal and Physical Threats

Legal and physical threats are a reality for customer service professionals. These are some guidelines for dealing with them professionally –

- Don't take threats personally
- Understand that you have no control over what the customer does
- Give a patient hearing to the customer even after he has threatened
- Try to solve the problem and satisfy
- Report the threat to the right people
- You must do your job irrespective of indecent behavior shown by the customer
- If the customer follows up with the threats, be ready to assist the legal team in every way you can

## Managing Your Emotions (De-escalating Your Anger)

Dealing with a difficult customer can be emotionally draining. It can cause you to get angry yourself. However, you cannot remain angry for long because you have the next customer to deal with, who is entitled to your best behavior.



Here are some tips to de-escalate your anger after you have finished with the customer –



- Take deep breaths to calm yourself
- If possible, talk to someone and vent your anger
- Do not dwell on the issue and move on

Take a small break and have a tea, coffee, snack, or something else to take your mind off your last customer.

## Electronic Customer Service

With the advent of computers and World Wide Web, customer service through chats and e-mails has become common. Such electronic customer service has its own dimensions, which we will discuss here.

### Chat or E-mail

Talking to someone through messages, in real time, is called chatting. These days, companies provide round-the-clock chat support on their website. Here a customer simply clicks on the chat icon and the customer service department gets notified that a customer wants to chat. As a customer service representative, you have to be always alert that you could be asked to handle the customer through chat.

E-mail is another popular mode of requesting for customer service. Out of more than 200 billion email messages being sent each day, customer service mails form an important segment. Handling customer requests through mail is one of the easiest ways of providing customer service as you can answer the queries at your convenience. However you should try to reply as soon as possible to win over the customer.



Here are some points to keep in mind when providing customer service through chat or e-mail –

- Always reply to a message by the customer immediately
- Keep your tone professional
- Be crisp and to the point
- Show respect for the customer

Use a language that can be understood easily by a common man; industry specific jargons and acronyms are a complete no.

## Understanding Netiquette

Etiquette is the practice of good manners. Good manners include being polite and helpful, being kind and not aggressive, and being mindful of the fact that others may see things differently than oneself. The etiquettes that should be followed while using the Internet are called **netiquettes**.

Here are some common netiquettes you should try to abide –

- Behave with others the way you want them to behave with you
- Do not use foul language even if the customer is abusive
- Don't copy-paste information blindly; customize it to suit customer requirements

## Pros and Cons of Electronic Communication

In the modern world of hyper-connectivity, a company cannot ignore any channel for connecting with and engaging the customer. A huge segment of customers prefer to avail online services, so it makes business sense to have online presence.

Electronic communication through websites, chats, e-mail and social media presence offers many advantages –

- Company is available when the customers need it
- Pre-sales support is easier to implement
- Constructive interactions with potential customers can be invoked
- Real time service can be provided to establish robust buyer-seller relationship
- Continuous visibility is easy to maintain
- Easier to maintain records and generate analytics and reports

However, electronic communication has some disadvantages as well –

- Software and tools required are expensive
- Training of customer service staff is essential
- It can only be additional to voice support, not a solution in itself

## Customer Service - Mini Case Study

Here is a typical scenario you could often find yourself in.

A customer is on the phone asking you why feature X of his product is not working as per the instructions given.

Combined with the problem statement, other problems could arise too. Let us now take up each possibility one by one and also discuss how you can solve it.

### **Case 1: You have no idea what the customer is talking about**

There is no need to feel defensive about this. It can happen to anyone, especially if you are new or the product is new. You should never accept ignorance to the customer. Instead, focus on customer's need. Try saying something like this –

*“You want help with feature X, right? Let me find this out for you. Please wait for a couple of minutes till I do this.”*

The customer will never realise you don't know about the feature. Instead he will note your willingness to assist him. Just make it a point to do your research quickly and solve the problem to the satisfaction of the customer.

### **Case 2: You know what the feature is**

If you know about the feature and how it works, you should be confident about successfully handling the customer. Even if you have not had a customer come in with the same problem, go ahead and ask the customer to walk you through his process.

Be patient and listen carefully. You should be able to point out the problem as new customers are bound to make errors they can't notice themselves. At no point should you belittle the customer for overlooking a small point.

### **Case 3: Customer is Angry**

If the customer is angry, calm him down. Here are some ways of doing this –

- Listen patiently to his rants
- Do not interrupt, however valid your point
- Be polite and say “sorry”

Never try to offer a solution till the customer is angry. It is a proven fact that you can never satisfy an angry customer.

After you have solved the customer's problem, de-escalate your own feelings so that you are able to deal with the next customer properly.

### **Case 4: Customer is Threatening Legal Action**

If the customer is threatening with legal action because the product is not working as promised, remain cool and try to pacify the customer. Here are some steps you can take –

- Assure the customer that feature X works for all products and so there should be no reason for any problem with his piece
- Assure him of your commitment to solve his problem
- Be patient and listen him out
- Thank him for contacting you to get his problem solved

If you are not able to handle the customer to his satisfaction, don't hesitate in asking your supervisor to step in. He must be having more experience dealing with such a situation.

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