

Seven steps to legendary customer service.

## **Delivering Legendary Customer Service**

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at  
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/2073.html?s=pdf>

## Step 2:

# Create a Quality Service Experience

---

Communications skills such as the ones we discussed in the previous chapter are important, but legendary customer service involves much more than good communication skills. Beyond these basics, there are things that people say and do that form the building blocks of an excellent service experience. The good news is that these are things that you can learn and practice as part of your own personal service style. Some of these skills include:

- Learning what phrases to use (and avoid) to create a strong customer relationship.

### *Delivering Legendary Customer Service*

- Controlling “negative expectation,” the tendency to over-protect your interests instead of soliciting what is best for the customer.
- Practicing good non-verbal communication, in areas such as eye contact and body language.
- Above all, using the “105% rule” to manage your customer’s expectations and then consistently exceed them.

If there is one common thread running through each of these techniques, it is that most of them are habits that can be developed easily with practice. They do not require the strength of Hercules, or a change in your personality, to work into your daily routine. At the same time, most of them transcend normal human relations – if you practice them and make them good habits, you will stand out from the vast majority of people who interact with the public. Here, we will look in detail at how to put each of them to work in your own daily life as a customer service professional.

### What You Say is What You Get

An old joke among football fans discusses three people in heaven, talking about the bravest accomplishments of their lives. One man states that he saved his mother from drowning. The second says that he rescued his neighbors from a burning house. The third finally says, "I rooted for the New York Giants at Chicago's Soldier Field.". The others asked him when he had done that, and he replied, "Five minutes ago." Nearly everyone can tell a story about the consequences when someone said the wrong thing. Less often discussed, but equally important, is the

strong positive effect of saying the right thing in many situations. Good customer relationships are often made -- or lost -- in small efforts that require little time. The most important of these revolve around what you say to people.

To treat customers well, one of the most productive things you can do right away is also one of the simplest. Learn the phrases that make people feel good, and become aware of the ones that make people feel bad. Phrases such as the ones that follow are easy, cost-free, and surprisingly effective ways to build a strong, positive relationship with the public. If you adapt phrases similar to the ten best listed below into your own personal style, and watch out for the ten worst, you will send the vast majority of your customers away much happier than when they arrived.

When you start using these phrases, you will reap two immediate benefits for yourself. First, your dealings with people will become much easier and friendlier. Second, and most important, you'll develop a first class attitude that will enhance your overall skills with the public.

## The Ten Best Things to Say to a Customer

There are several things you can say to a customer that can make a big difference in how the relationship and the events of the day proceed.

"I'll be happy to"

When confronted with a customer request, you have a fundamental decision to make -- you will say yes, or you will say no. If that request falls within your responsibilities, it is likely

that you will say yes. But the words you choose to phrase this yes could make your customer feel upset or feel great.

The presence or lack of enthusiasm makes no difference in how much work you do. If you enthusiastically agree to look up some information for a customer, or grudgingly agree to look it up, you are still going to look up the same information. Enthusiastic, affirmative agreement costs you nothing and gains you a great deal of positive attention, both from your customers and your management. If you are going to do something anyway, it costs you nothing to make people feel good about it.

Try an experiment tomorrow. Do exactly the same amount of work you normally do, but agree to everything with gusto. Get into the habit of saying things like "I sure can" instead of the usual "I can." When someone asks you to do something, respond with a heartfelt "My pleasure." Smile and nod a great deal -- even on the phone - when people talk to you.

At the end of that day, you will be amazed at how much fun you had. The work you did will seem less like work. People will respond to you better. If you continue this experiment over time, you may find yourself being considered one of the most talented, smart, and effective people in your company. The way you respond to people is one of those high-payoff items that costs nothing.

### "That's a very understandable problem"

Many customers feel embarrassed about bringing their problems to you for help. In these situations, you have two goals: to solve their problem and to make them feel good for having asked you to solve it.

One major pharmacy chain built a recent television advertisement around this issue. A worried man comes in, paces around the pharmacy counter for a while, then asks the

pharmacist in hushed tones about the side effects of his medication. After the usual commercial message, the ad returns to show the obviously relieved man thanking the smiling pharmacist. The implication is that people will shop where they aren't made to feel foolish for asking advice.

Psychologist Carl Rogers summarized this issue as his principle of unconditional positive regard -- to listen without judgment to what a person is saying, and respond empathetically to that person's feelings. Rogers was one of the first researchers in his field to show that the empathy a patient felt was at least as important a factor in getting well as the counseling techniques themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Putting customers at ease about their concerns is one of the fundamental ways of building that bond of empathy in your own work. Personally, whenever people tell me that they feel bad for bothering me, I always say, "Look, this my profession. I enjoy solving your problems. The saddest day of my life will be when no one calls or comes in anymore." And I truly mean it.

"I've had a lot of experience with that problem"

It makes people feel good to know that they are dealing with an expert. Put the opposite way, how would you feel if a mechanic took your car's engine apart, scratched his head, and said "Gee, I've never had any experience with these V-6's." What if you stepped on board a jet airliner, and the pilot timidly announced over the intercom that this was his first flight?

Believing that customers come first doesn't imply you must be humble and servile. In actuality, it's good to toot your own horn. Most of us prefer win-win situations dealing with equals who enjoy doing a good job.

Examples abound of the "healthy ego" that's part of a certain pride in what you do. Animators who drew Donald Duck cartoons for Walt Disney would show off by painting faithful reproductions of the great paintings of history, replacing the main subject with you-know-who.<sup>6</sup> Jet propulsion engineers from a major aircraft manufacturer once pitted their skills against the public in a paper airplane contest. Even the people who run Rhode Island's largest garbage dump offer picture postcards, tours, and at one point an evening lecture series entitled "Dinner at the Dump".

Look at the real estate section of any newspaper and you'll see many sales or achievement awards listed after people's names. Why? You'll understand the minute you set out to sell your house. You want that feeling of certainty that someone can get the job done. If you're great at what you do, never be afraid to let it show.

### "I'll get you an expert"

Of course, you can't always call yourself an expert and mean it. Nor should you. If you are a good doctor, but not a brain surgeon, I do not want you to perform brain surgery on me. It's perfectly alright to admit an honest lack of knowledge as long as you keep your focus on finding the resources to solve your customer's problem.

One of the best responses in situations like this may be to consult with another expert for how to solve another person's problems - and perhaps learn from that expert yourself. When you smile and say, "I want to make sure your problem gets fixed right. I'm going to have our supervisor come talk to you," you are granting that customer a certain importance. Also a second opinion can open up possible solutions that might not have occurred to either of you alone. The Rev. Robert H. Schuller

describes this kind of expert relationship as "linking-thinking," where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.<sup>7</sup>

As you bring other people's resources to bear on a problem, remember that the best kinds of working relationships are often built around tooting one another's horns as well as your own. When a customer brings in a car with a leaky transmission, and you can truthfully say "I'll arrange to have Joe work on it. He's one of the best transmission experts in the business," you are building a great relationship with both the customer and Joe.

### "Here's what we will do"

Telling someone exactly what you will do for them, and when, leaves an important sense of closure to a customer transaction. You should never leave a customer wondering what will be done next for their problem.

A person's perception of customer service depends as much upon how you treat them as it does on raw response time. You might assume that people would be happier with an immediate response than with being called back later. All else being equal, this is true. However, years of running a telephone hotline has shown me that people are often happier with a pleasant referral than a surly on-the-spot answer!

I see this trait time and again in myself. When my flight gets delayed, and the ticket agent explains the situation, empathizes with me, and works hard to get me on another flight, I still feel good about the airline. But if I grocery shopping, and the checkout clerk scowls and curtly dumps my change in my hand without a word, I am angry at the grocery store. If I were to confront the clerk, I'm sure the response would be, "Well, I did my job and gave you your change, didn't I?" Yes, but if the clerk made me feel like a chump. I'm not as likely to return to that store.



*Delivering Legendary Customer Service*

The single biggest productivity tool in a customer transaction is to close by summarizing the action. Take the case of calling a ticket agency and the conversation goes flat.

**Customer:** I'd like two seats to next Friday night's opera.

**Service:** May I have your name, address and credit card number?

**Customer:** Here it is...

**Service:** OK. Thank you for calling.

This "OK" usually will not close the transaction but instead will probably result in a barrage of follow-on questions from the customer such as, "When will my tickets arrive?" "What time does the performance start?" "Could you verify that you got my address right?" "Let's make sure I'm being ticketed for the right event." It will also leave a bad impression with the customer and probably infuriate them if a mistake is discovered later. With a proactive summary, the chances are much better that the transaction will end quickly, pleasantly and free of errors:

**Customer:** I'd like two seats to next Friday night's opera.

**Service:** May I have your name, address and credit card number?

**Customer:** Here it is...

**Service:** Thank you, Mr. Davis. I've reserved two tickets in seats 31-F and 31-G for *La Boheme* at 8 PM on Friday night, May 12 at the Metro Concert Hall. I'll be sending them to 31 Lake Street, Smithfield, California 91234, and they should arrive by Wednesday. Is there anything else I can help you with, Mr. Davis?

**Customer:** No. Thank you very much!

**Service:** Thank you, Mr. Davis. Have a nice day.

Summaries are particularly important when there is a problem. In the case of the delayed flight mentioned earlier, the ticket agent's manner not only makes me feel better but also boosts their own productivity in the process. Because I am satisfied that the best efforts are being made on my behalf, I move along instead of arguing with the agent or demanding to see a supervisor. The person who understands what to say when a problem can't be fixed right away spends less time, and faces less anger, than the person who doesn't. It's important, above all, to fill a customer's need. At the same time, using a proactive summary to grant a customer the importance and empathy their problem deserves -- whether or not that need can be immediately filled -- is one of the true secret weapons that will make your work with customers easier and more productive.

### "Can we do anything else for you?"

This is not always an easy question to ask, particularly with a difficult customer. Why? Because they might actually ask you to do something else.

Still, this ranks as one of the better cost-free ways to spread good feelings. It says that you care. Although 99 per cent of the time, the answer is, "no, I don't need anything else," almost everyone will think that it was very nice of you to ask. Since many customer service jobs are in busy, stressful environments where many people try to do as little as possible, your positive attitude will stand out in the customer's mind.

Another good reason to ask this is that it makes sure your customers are really satisfied. We are all prone to having a hidden agenda of what we really want, in spite of what we ask for. Computer users, for example, are often afraid to ask direct questions they feel might make them look ignorant. Asking if they would like anything more explained further makes the

whole transaction easier for the customers without being pushy or invasive.

## "Thank you"

Your job does depend on customers using your services. As corny as it sounds, saying "thank you" makes them feel welcome to return in the future.

The funny thing about thank you is that it's so widespread in our service culture that its absence stands out a great deal more than when it is said. Don't risk seeming rude by leaving out a pleasant send-off.

Many companies have their employees use specific phrases such as "Thank you for shopping with us." There is nothing wrong with official pleasantries, done with the right sense of style, and in the absence of a standard closing it is just as important to develop your own personal ways of sending people off with a smile. It might be a sincere "Thanks for calling," "Take care," the omnipresent "Have a nice day," or something completely unique to you. Either way, the right sendoff lets people know that you enjoyed helping them.

## "Nice to hear from you again. How are you?"

How often do you hear this one? When you turn a faceless customer into a friend, the benefits are plenty. First of all, you've gained a friend. Second, you've made it much more likely that future problems will be handled with respect on both sides. Third, you've often gained a customer for life.

The amount of familiarity that you develop with customers will depend on the frequency of contact that you have with them. Either way, the same principle applies. If you work with random, faceless hordes every day, you can still welcome them

warmly and treat them well. If you have more frequent contact with customers, however, it is important to understand the effect that regulars have on your business.

If a bank loses your paycheck, and you talk with an indifferent, anonymous bank teller about it, your immediate anger is probably directed at the teller. If you talk with someone with whom you have a longstanding friendship, you're more likely to be mad at the bank. In fact, with a good enough relationship, you might even avoid being mad at all - provided that they do, in fact, find your paycheck!).

## Use the customer's name

For most people, few things capture their attention better than their own name. The personal touch reaffirms one's sense of self and uniqueness in the impersonal, "Dear Taxpayer" world we live in. Moreover, it gives people the good feeling that, if you took the trouble to notice their name, you'll probably take the time to solve their problem as well.

You have an advantage here in situations like phone service, where customers often contact you first and give you their name. Write it down or type it in as you start speaking to someone. Even in person, you probably know more customers by name than you think you do.

When a customer hands you a business card, or a credit card, you then have the ability to say, "Thank you, Mr. Davis." When someone at the office refers a customer to you, you can get their name from your co-worker and greet them by name when you first see them. And when someone has a meeting with you, have your receptionist and support staff greet them by name.

One person who will always stand out in my memory is Liz, the receptionist for a Southern California computing firm. I would call and ask for someone, and she would connect

## Delivering Legendary Customer Service

me. By about the third time I'd called, she would greet me with "Hello, Rich! I'll bet you're looking for so-and-so." By then, I didn't even have to identify myself -- she'd recognize my voice and greet me with small talk.

Over the years, my contacts with the company became more sporadic. At times, more than a year would go between calls, yet every time, I would be recognized and made to feel welcome by someone who had never even met me. That company, which receives hundreds of calls per day, is gifted with someone who adds a rare personal touch for its clients. There is no question that it adds to their reputation.

### "Come back if you need more help"

In the opening scene of the Walt Disney movie *Lady and the Tramp*, there is a quotation that says, "There is one thing that all the world's riches cannot buy -- to wit, the wag of a dog's tail."<sup>8</sup> In the same manner, no amount of effort on your end will ever let you usurp the customer's right to judge whether their needs have been satisfied.

Telling someone to come back if they need more help affirms the truth that it's their right and not yours to declare the transaction completed. It's one of the nicest ways to send off a customer.

## The Ten Worst Things to Say to a Customer

Most of us could come up with a very long list of the "worst" things to say to customers, and the majority of these would probably involve some degree of rudeness. I suspect, however, that you and I are not rude people -- we are, of course, nice

people. Going on this presumption, this section is a summary of the worst things that nice people say to customers, things that you and I could say if we aren't careful.

### "That isn't my job"

One of the worst things that could happen to your career, whether you are in the mailroom or the boardroom, is to fall into the trap of, "That isn't my job." If you plan to be a success in a public-oriented position, your job is to send people away happy whenever and however possible.

It is a very tempting statement to make. If you work in the men's department of a retail store, and a customer asks you for help in the adjoining toy department, it probably isn't your job. You may not be able to ring up the customer's purchase even if you want to. Nonetheless, the customer is much more interested in having his problem solved than he is in your job description.

A good response to this situation is to offer to get someone from the toy department, and pick up the phone and page them. Better yet, go and find someone yourself. It is never acceptable to tell them that it isn't your department, and walk away. What you say is of equal importance to what you do. If you truly cannot assist the customer, make sure that what you say is oriented towards what will be done to solve their problem -- even if what you do is cheerfully linking them up with someone who can do the job better.

More to the point, examine carefully what you can do for people within the bounds of your job. In the years I have spent managing a software support hotline, we have gladly handled everything from financial contract issues to restaurant reservations for customers. One even called me asking how to spell *Szechuan*, so he could find a restaurant in the phone book. For that matter, if someone had called up wondering what to do

about a sick elephant, we wouldn't have sent them away without at least a couple of phone calls in search of a good elephant veterinarian. A good rule of thumb for almost anyone is the can do attitude -- if you can, do.

### "Did you read the manual?"

If they did, it's an unspeakably rude thing to say. Even if they didn't, it certainly doesn't make you seem eager to help. Instead, be positive and suggest exactly where they should look -- and better yet, if it doesn't take too long, answer the question as well.

The phrase "read the manual" has become a stereotype, particularly in fields such as consumer products and computer software. It tells us how too many people on the outside see these companies' view of service. A recent joke in the software business goes, "How many computer programmers does it take to change a light bulb? None -- it's a hardware problem." Like any stereotype, this one tangibly hurts growth and business. In my mind, the "read the manual" attitude of expecting people to know everything in advance ranks right up there with "that isn't my job" as career poison.

There are some situations where the customer should have done a lot more homework, or is even totally beyond help. We'll discuss these cases later. Consider them as the rare exceptions that they are.

### "You don't understand"

Here is a variation of the old saying, "The customer is always right": if someone doesn't understand you, it's always your fault -- even when it is their fault.

You have to be particularly careful on this point, because when you are the expert on something, many legitimate

questions will seem dim-witted, and people will seem slower to grasp things than they should.

If you are a mother or a teacher, you have a head start at understanding this issue. Answering questions takes kindness, patience and a time-honed skill at finding different ways of explaining things. Take your time, keep an even tone of voice, and smile as you try to get your point across.

"I don't know what I can do about it"

This is the phrase that angers me the most when I hear it. What makes it even more frustrating is the fact that many people in the habit of saying this could do something about it if they cared to.

The same comments for "that isn't my job" apply here as well. Your focus should be on the customer's problem and not your potential lack of expertise. A very positive way replacement statement is to say, "What would you like me (or us) to do about it?" This empowers customers to tell you exactly what they would like, which enables you to give a direct answer.

"What do you want?"

This doesn't refer to the rude, "Whaddya want?" borne of annoyance. Rather it is the implication that the customer is somehow interrupting you and perhaps shouldn't have. Even in the most pleasant tone of voice, asking what customers want puts them on the spot.

Always put yourself at people's service. Emphasize your willingness to help rather than their problem. Replace "What do you want" or "What do you need" with phrases like "What can I do for you" or "How can we help you". I once worked for a gregarious Texan who never answered a phone call without saying "Can I help you?" in the same breath as his name. It's a



nice touch that I've since taken on myself, and it puts people immediately at ease that they aren't bothering me.

### "You'll have to call us back"

Why don't you or your company offer to call them back?

I will grant one tiny exception to this issue. There are businesses that, as a matter of course, do not return long distance telephone calls for cost reasons. (These companies should hope that they never have competitors who do.) If you are in the position of working for such a firm, the burden is on you to politely explain the company's policy, while emphasizing how important the customer's problem is to you.

### "You're all set now"

It's natural to feel that you've solved a customer's problem. That appraisal, however, should come from the customer, not you.

It's alright to say that something should fix a customer's problem, especially if you invite them to come back if they need more help. But if you are too presumptive, however, it will seem that you are impatient and anxious to get rid of the customer.

### "That's an unusual request"

For most people, telling them they are different from everyone else makes them feel stupid and insecure.

Some professions use this fact to their advantage. You make a reasonable offer on a new car, and they laugh at what a ridiculously low figure it is -- just to make you feel bad enough to offer more money. The problem with taking this mentality into normal customer transactions is that putting someone on the defensive instantly vaporizes any rapport between you.

The key here is to separate your personal feelings about the customer from your mission, which is to send that person away

## *Delivering Legendary Customer Service*

satisfied. It is perhaps too easy, when a customer seems like a pain in the neck, to find ways to transmit this evaluation back to the customer. A better approach is to make it a matter of personal policy never to evaluate your customers, unless it's in the form of a compliment to put them at ease.

In the example of the car dealer, there is an incentive to try to deflect a customer's request by pointing out that it is different. Unfortunately, when it succeeds, you've often deflected the customer as well. A better approach with unreasonable requests is to politely defer, and blame it on yourself: "I'd love to sell you that car for \$200.00, but my manager would shoot me. Would you like me to see what kind of a price I can get for you?" In general, honesty is the best policy. But above all, don't pass judgment on your customers.

### "I have no idea"

No one person knows everything, and it is perfectly OK to admit your ignorance. What you should avoid at all costs is to do so and then leave the customer hanging about what to do next. Here are two ways to handle this situation.

#### **Not so good:**

**Customer:** Where can I purchase rocket fuel for the Space Shuttle?

**Service:** I wouldn't know.

#### **Better:**

**Customer:** Where can I purchase rocket fuel for the Space Shuttle?

**Service:** I'm not sure myself, but let's see if we can find out for you. Have you tried talking to NASA?

## *Delivering Legendary Customer Service*

**Customer:** No, I hadn't thought of that.

**Service:** I'll try to find their number for you ... Hello, Cape Canaveral directory assistance, can I have a phone number for NASA? Thank you ... OK, here's the number. Have a nice day.

Since every situation is different, we all must make judgments about how far we ourselves should go to help someone in a difficult situation. The key point here is to guide people, whenever possible, to the next step in solving their problem.

## Silence

Silence isn't golden in the field of customer support. Silence translates to inaction in the mind of the customer, and being too low-key is seen as rude.

Suppose that you walk up to a bank teller, hand him your life savings of \$50,000, and ask him to deposit it. He then says nothing, gives you no receipt, and then calls for the next person in line. Do you walk away satisfied? More likely, you want to grab this person by the tie and demand a receipt, to make sure your money is deposited correctly.

In the same way, an answer from you serves as a verbal receipt. It tells the customer that you heard them, and what your response is. Moreover, liberal feedback allows both you and the customer to be sure you understood each other. You avoid the situation where your customer wanted two plows and instead receives two cows.

Always be directive and action-oriented. tell the customer exactly what you plan to do, and what he/she can do if that doesn't help.

## How to Always Say the Right Thing

Examples such as the ones above serve as reminders of things to say and not say. At the same time, they point out a greater sense of style in how you deal with customers within your own specific profession. If you develop habits of speech along the lines of the ten best things just discussed, the chances are good that you'll naturally avoid falling into the trap of saying phrases like these ten worst ones. Your basic stance towards customers, day in and day out, is a great source of influence on what automatically comes out when you open your mouth.

One day my wife and I went to an auto garage selling a promotional flashlight for four dollars. We bought one, but discovered when we got it home that it required an expensive lantern battery instead of regular flashlight batteries. When I took it back and asked for a refund, the manager first refused, then changed his mind and handed me the money with a great deal of annoyance. When I told him that I appreciated it, he said angrily, "Yeah, I bet you do."

This garage is not only four dollars poorer but also lost our business, permanently. To this day, we go out of our way to have our automobiles serviced elsewhere. Ironically, if I had even been refused the refund politely, we would probably still be using their services.

Too often, our response to people is governed by our feelings, instead of our thoughts. Someone bothers us, so we react automatically with annoyance. Another person feels we fouled up, so we instinctively defend ourselves instead of fixing the problem. The problem with feelings is that they offer little guidance in responding to people.

Instead, transactions with customers need to be practiced and managed in much the same way that one might manage their cash flow or production schedules. Understand the most common situations that you are likely to encounter in dealing with the public, learn the most appropriate ways of dealing with these situations, and then practice them until they become a habit. Had this garage owner better understood his best response to the standard refund situation, he would have been much less likely to shoot from the hip and lose our business.

Common phrases such as the ones above represent more than good guidelines. With practice, they become part of a style in which saying the right thing becomes more automatic over time.

Start introducing some of these phrases into your daily work with customers today, and see what a difference it makes. You will, in all likelihood, be very pleasantly surprised at the change that it makes. Most importantly, you will be taking a positive step towards developing your own personal skill set for providing excellent service to people.

## Avoiding “Negative Expectation”

Deep down inside, most of us feel that we are nice people. At the same time, it is easy for us to become blind to what we instinctively say to people when they present us with a problem: we have an innate urge to protect ourselves, rather than help the customer. Understanding this instinct, and using this knowledge to change the way we interact with people, represents a critical turning point in developing a strong customer focus.

I recently experienced this phenomenon first hand when my home computer needed repairs under warranty. I was eventually instructed to take it in to a local computer store to

## Delivering Legendary Customer Service

have it fixed, and when I arrived there with computer in hand, the discussion went something like this:

**Me:** Hello. I'm here to get this computer fixed.

**Them:** We don't service this kind of computer here.

**Me:** But I was told by the warranty firm to bring it here.

**Them:** Oh ... well, we do fix those computers for that company. But they have to fax us an authorization form before we can work on it.

**Me:** They did fax you an authorization form. Here's a copy I brought with me.

**Them:** Oh, I see...

He finally summoned a technician, who told me that the store had in fact had been expecting my computer, and promised me it would be fixed the same day. But when I called back late that afternoon, the woman answering the phone responded, "When did you bring it in? Today? It wouldn't be finished that soon." However, when I asked her to actually check, sure enough, the computer was ready.

Do you see a common denominator in these conversations? It's a phenomenon known as *negative expectation*. A customer presents you with a problem, and you respond with a list of all the things that you can't, don't and won't do. It then becomes the customer's responsibility to steer the discussion back towards fixing the problem. The focus is on your agenda, not the customer's.

Negative expectation happens so often because it's a part of human nature. Early in life, we learn to deal with the world's ceaseless demands by setting limits on what we will and will not do for others. The problem is that when you bring this human nature into a customer service setting, your priorities end up in the wrong place. Worse, you risk infuriating people when you use it in cases where you aren't correct - for example, I am

certainly not going to rush back to patronize this computer store in the future. Here are some ways to avoid setting negative expectations.

### Ask questions first

In the example above, the people at this computer store were so busy setting limits that they didn't take the time to assess what I wanted. In general, when you get that tingling urge to tell customers what cannot be done, that's a signal to slow down, ask lots of questions, and be sure you understand the customer completely.

### Paraphrase the customer

By interpreting and repeating what you hear from the customer, you have an opportunity to make sure you understand each other before you start making judgments on their requests.

### Check things out

Give people the benefit of the doubt and check out what they tell you, before you start making assumptions.

### Help proactively, limit reactively

When you can offer a benefit to a customer, speaking up ahead of being asked is the mark of a professional. Conversely, when you need to set limits on a customer's expectations, the customer should drive the process.

My wife and I once had a weekly habit where I would buy her a hot fudge sundae at an ice cream shop – but being health conscious, she liked it made with frozen yogurt rather than ice cream. Almost every time I came in, I would order the sundae, and the proprietor would reply with a

## *Delivering Legendary Customer Service*

dour “Frozen yogurt is 50 cents extra.” This happened so often that I became tempted to say “I’d like a hot fudge sundae with frozen yogurt and yes, I know, it’s 50 cents extra” every time I came in. It seemed like their focus was on constantly making sure that I understood their prices, rather than on making me feel welcome as a customer. Eventually, the shop went out of business.

Perhaps the most effective way to avoid negative expectation is to examine how you see your customers in the first place. If you see them as people who interrupt you, annoy you and demand too many things, and you react in kind, your perceptions will probably not be disappointed. On the other hand, if you start to see them as the lifeblood of your business and treat them as welcome guests, the need to set limits often drops dramatically – and when you do need to set limits, you will find that these situations can be managed using good communications skills. Try expecting the best from people, and see what a difference it makes in your customer relations.

## Body Language and Non-Verbal Communication

In face-to-face customer situations, your success depends upon a lot more than what you say. Compare getting help from someone who appears stern and cold, versus another person who is relaxed and helpful. Even though both may do exactly what you ask, there is a big difference in your perception of service quality.

Moreover, a person’s body language can have a great influence on how the overall customer transaction goes. When someone acts chilly towards you, you may not trust or accept



what they say – which can in turn lead to longer transactions, more work, or even escalation to a supervisor. Conversely, a friendly demeanor can go a long way in resolving a situation quickly and professionally.

Non-verbal communication carries a lot more weight than most people think. By managing it well, you can add a substantial boost to your customer skills. In most situations, your physical reactions matter every bit as much as what you say.

One day, my wife had to go to the emergency room at our local hospital. She was frightened and uncomfortable, sitting perched on the examining table waiting for the doctor to come in. Once the doctor arrived and saw the look on her face, he did something I've never seen a physician do before. Instead of standing over her to ask questions, he hopped up on the examining table to sit next to her, and bent down towards her, like an old friend, to listen intently to what she was saying. Before long, she had calmed down considerably.

Perhaps a simple definition of good non-verbal communication is to interact with your customers the same way that you would with your friends and acquaintances. At a more detailed level, we can break this down into four specific kinds of behavior.

## Eye contact

Looking away from people is a classic sign of disinterest. (Conversely, too much eye contact, such as staring, will make people equally uncomfortable.) By making it a point to look at people in the eye regularly when you speak with them – particularly when you first address them – you will demonstrate

interest and empathy, which in turn will help the transaction move forward successfully.

## Facial expression

Smiling at customers has become a cliché, to the point where customer service workshops in the business world are often referred to as “smile training.” Yet it remains one of the single most important ways to build a bond with people, particularly in difficult situations. A sincere smile conveys a willingness to help, demonstrates respect for the customer, and defuses anger.

Keeping a smile on your face is only the beginning of a good facial expression, however. You could smile all day at people and still create a poor impression on them, because your face can mirror a wide range of emotions.

Try an experiment sometime: stand in front of a mirror, and smile. Now try arching your eyebrows. Next, let out a sigh. Finally, smirk to one side. Would you feel you were getting good service with expressions like that? Probably not. Therefore, your goal is to maintain an open, positive, natural expression in front of the public. With practice, this look can be one that you naturally adopt when people first approach you for service.

## Stance

How you react physically to the customer makes an important impression as well. Since prehistoric times, we have used our posture to protect ourselves or welcome others, and today our basic physical stance still conveys the same kinds of messages. Cues such as raised shoulders, crossed arms or putting our head down sends a signal that we are trying to close ourselves off from customers, while an open, relaxed stance invites communication.

## Proximity

Every culture has an unspoken standard for how close two people should be to each other in normal conversation. (And it does vary between cultures; sometimes when two people from different countries are speaking together, one person keeps moving closer, and the other unconsciously keeps moving steadily backwards!) Normally, the best thing to do is follow the lead of your customers and remain close enough to demonstrate your interest.

Techniques like these become part of our own personal style with people. For some people, good non-verbal social skills come naturally, while for others, things can improve a great deal with insight and practice. Either way, they work in conjunction with each person's specific personality to create our own unique way of interacting with customers.

Normally, it makes sense to employ both good verbal and non-verbal communication skills to create a positive customer relationship. (There is one exception to this rule - there are situations, fortunately rare, where people of the opposite sex can mistake professional courtesy for personal interest. In these cases, trust your own judgment, and know when to back away.) However, the vast majority of customer transactions will benefit strongly from the right kind of body language and facial expressions, together with your good communications skills.

## Your Secret Weapon: the 105% Principle

Handling customer transactions well has many dimensions. Much of what separates the best people in this business from everyone else boils down to a single, very simple philosophy: when your customers have a reasonable expectation to a certain

level of service, give them what they expect, plus a little bit more. I refer to this principle as the 105% rule.

Does this sound like just another way of saying work harder? Not quite. Hard work, important as it is, is almost beside the point. The real issue here is managing, and then exceeding, people's expectations. The trick behind the 105% rule is to set realistic expectations and then exceed them at least a little. People aren't accustomed in this culture to getting even 100 per cent of what they wanted in the first place. Far too often, they're happy when they get even 80 per cent. So when you give them a little more than the minimum required in your job -- not necessarily a lot more, but even a little more -- it stands in stark contrast to practically everyone else.

Management expert Ken Blanchard once devoted an entire book to this concept: his bestselling *Raving Fans* tells a fable where the hero discovers a shield, which eventually reveals a message about learning what customers want and then delivering it to them "plus one."<sup>9</sup> In the real world, this simple concept forms the core of what can put you above your competition, whatever you do. Note these practical examples of giving 105% in customer situations.

- You need to refer a customer to someone else, and instead of telling the customer to call Mr. Smith, you offer to arrange for Mr. Smith to call the customer.
- You've just solved a tough problem for a customer, and you say "I enjoyed getting that fixed. Made my day."
- You take care of someone's problem, but then spend some extra time explaining exactly what you did.

Perhaps a key point here is that none of these examples necessarily involve putting in large amounts of extra work. They may simply be small, incremental efforts that may add no more

*Delivering Legendary Customer Service*

than a few extra seconds to these transactions. Whatever effort you choose to invest, great or small, can be viewed profitably along the lines of an investment in the success of the customer, your organization and yourself.

Companies recognize the 105% factor as a big plus in their reputations. You can see it in their advertising. Years ago, a magazine advertisement for one major airline showed a gate agent leaping over a row of seats in the boarding lounge. It goes on to tell a true-life story of how the gate agent returned a passenger's briefcase just before his flight took off. At a more personal level, however, the 105% rule is an effective means of making customer transactions go smoothly: the old adage to "kill them with kindness" really does work. We can see this in ourselves. How do you feel when you come in to a store with a problem, you are full of defenses, and then they do more than you asked? Your emotional battle armor melts away, you work with them to conclude the transaction quickly and professionally, and you come away wanting to do business with them in the future. Sometimes, practicing this rule can have an very tangible payoff.

I will never forget the time, early in my own career, when a university professor in our field imposed upon me for a favor. His school was buying a large amount of computer graphics equipment, and they wanted my advice on what to purchase. He would have been happy if I had simply called him back with a few ideas. Instead, I decided to spend part of my weekend providing him with as much information as I could, as a professional courtesy, for what would be an important purchase for them. I wrote and sent him a lengthy report describing the various kinds of equipment, what to look for, and where the industry seemed to be heading.

### *Delivering Legendary Customer Service*

I had all but forgotten this exercise a few months later when I received another letter from the professor. He was now in charge of an international project to send visiting technical experts to universities in the People's Republic of China, and was wondering if I would be interested in an all-expenses-paid trip there to teach computer graphics. That trip was the experience of a lifetime, and the first in a number of international speaking engagements.

While the side effects may not be this profound or direct, one thing seems to be invariably true for almost everyone: providing a level of service which exceeds expectations, even a little bit, is a cornerstone to one's reputation for excellence with customers. I personally feel that the 105% rule is a simple principle that all but guarantees excellent relations with your customers, not to mention your company, the public and even your family.

A more typical example in my case was a situation where one of our software customers needed a problem fixed for an important management presentation. There were all sorts of problems, and the error was not resolved until the evening before the big presentation. Eventually, things ended up with me personally staying at work until 10 PM, driving the fixed product to the airport, and finally calling the customer at home in bed and telling him what flight the software would be on.

We didn't win the Nobel Prize for this evening of extra effort. However, the customer was sufficiently impressed to become a long term customer of our company and to write a nice letter to the company's president expressing his thanks for all of the effort that we had put in. The most important side effect was really measured in the long-term, cumulative effects of a customer base, which doubled in size every year during my five-year tenure.

## *Delivering Legendary Customer Service*

One further point in applying the 105% rule to your professional toolkit is that doing it really well calls for a little bit of homework on your part. If you work for an organization, it is good to know what kinds of resources you have to solve a customer's problem in advance.

For example, some firms allow front line staff to resolve problems up to a certain dollar limit without consulting a manager, while others may simply trust their people to exercise good judgment and good business sense. When customers call with computer problems, it may not make economic sense to send each of them another free computer, but it does make sense to know how much budgetary or merchandise authority you have in solving problems effectively. Know your limits so that you can balance serving customers well with the financial realities of your company's product or service.

The 105% rule is one of the least understood principles of success in almost all areas of endeavor. For example, as a hiring manager, I have always noted that because so few applicants display a genuine interest in the job itself, people with even a little bit of interest really stand out, and are much more likely to get hired. Similarly, companies that provide even a little more care or service tend to get repeat business. Companies successful in the service arena often seem to prosper as much from sweating the small details as they do from grand differences in products or services. Putting forth 105 percent in your own working environment today will yield a guaranteed return on the investment.

## Creating Service Leadership

If there is one core concept behind each of the ideas discussed here, it is taking a leadership role in creating a good service experience for each and every customer. Most people simply react to customer situations, while people who deliver legendary customer service treat them more like small performances in which they are the principal actor. And much like acting, the more time you invest to hone and perfect your craft, the better the performance will be. Techniques like the ones presented here are building blocks that you can use to create a great performance in any customer situation.

With practice, your communications skills and service skills become part of an overall style with customers, and this style in turn determines the image that you and your organization present to the world. When someone is described as being “customer focused” or having “a great attitude,” it is often a matter of having developed these skills to where they become part of their nature. And when an entire organization commits to learning these skills, this style becomes part of its reputation, and more often than not, part of its growth rate and market share. These skills represent not only good customer relations, but one of the easiest and most cost-free ways to become successful in both the marketplace and your own personal career.



Seven steps to legendary customer service.

## **Delivering Legendary Customer Service**

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at  
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/2073.html?s=pdf>