

Communicating With Customers

An Entry-Level Guide



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Summary

On a first job, students suddenly find themselves "on the other side of the counter" dealing with customers who range from polite to puzzled, from indecisive to just plain ornery. *Communicating With Customers* teaches how to deal with people-as-customers. Viewers learn how to defuse the anger of customer, the importance of attitude and appearance, how to deal with customers on the telephone and how to serve "lemon aid".

Key points:

- Learn the importance of making a connection with customers.
- Discover the value of listening and taking a real interest in your customers and their needs.
- See how tone of voice and body language influences job performance.
- Learn why it's a bad idea to make negative comments about customers on the job.
- Discover how to handle miscommunications and phrase helpful responses.
- Learn a simple, five-step process for dealing with angry customers.

What Makes Good Customer Service?

When you work in a retail store, what services are you offering? You may think that your employer is paying you to prepare food, stock shelves, or tidy up the sales floor. But those aren't the real reasons that you're there. Your employer is paying you to serve the needs of his or her customers. Without good customer service, the customers would disappear, and without customers, the business would fail. How you treat the customers has a big impact on how well the store succeeds.

So what makes good customer service? The main ingredient is trying to understand the customer. Understanding what a customer wants, doesn't want, and how he or she wants to be treated are the keys to having happy customers. There are many components to good customer service, but in the end they all come down to the same thing: understanding your customers.

Successful (and not-so-successful) interactions

How your customer feels about your interaction begins before you say a word. Your attitude is clear before you speak, and if you aren't friendly, a customer will know it. Begin with a smile. If you know the customer's name, use it. That personal touch spells friendliness, and it can give your employer a competitive edge against similar businesses in your area. This kind of friendly, personal approach is an essential aspect of good customer service.

Another essential practice is really listening to your customers. You can't assume that a customer will tell you exactly what they want from the beginning. Often you'll need to get some clarifying details. Give your customers a chance to talk about what they think is important. Take a real interest and connect with them. If you don't listen, you may answer the wrong question, or provide the wrong thing. Listening will help you to provide your customers with what they need and to enjoy your job more.

Choose words wisely

Try to remain positive when helping a customer. Phrasing something the wrong way can make a "yes" sound like a "no." Say your store has a policy that merchandise can be held until the end of the day. When a customer asks to put something on hold, don't respond by saying "I can only hold it until the end of the day." That sounds negative, even though you're saying yes. Instead, say something along the lines of, "I'll be happy to set it aside until the end of the day." Similarly, when answering a question, try to provide invitations instead of orders. If a customer is looking for staplers, don't say, "Go look next to the masking tape." That sounds bossy and curt. Instead, say, "Yes, we have regular and heavy-duty staplers. They're in aisle three, next to the masking tape." That kind of inviting response is far more helpful, and will keep both you and your customer in a good mood. Also, never criticize your employer. If you are negative about the business, your customers may begin to feel the same way, and that will drive them away.

There are some phrases you shouldn't use when dealing with customers.

- **Avoid saying “no.”** There are solutions to most things in life—if a customer asks for something that's not possible, try to offer alternatives. That way you're working with the customer to find a solution, rather than simply putting up a roadblock.
- **Don't say, “That's not my job.”** The customer isn't asking for your job description—she's asking for help with a specific problem. If you're not able to help the customer, politely direct her to someone who can.

Body Language And Tone Of Voice

What do you say when you're not saying anything?

When you're on the job, your body language is every bit as important as what you say. Your posture, gestures, and tone of voice can send strong signals to your customers, and those signals can have a big effect on your spoken interaction. Avoid body language that signals disinterest and boredom, such as:

- Resting your chin on your hand
- Slouching your shoulders
- Having a glum facial expression
- Looking away from the customer or avoiding eye contact

These bad habits will suggest to customers that you think of them as an interruption. Remember, you're there to serve their needs! Instead, try to signal alertness, interest, and a generally positive attitude:

- Stand up straight
- Smile and appear enthusiastic
- Face the customer and make eye contact
- Nod affirmatively

This kind of positive body language lets your customer know that you're taking an interest.

Tone of voice

How you speak also sends non-verbal signals. The same words can mean a number of things, depending on the volume, pitch, tone, and emphasis you use. An enthusiastic tone of voice will say "I'm interested" and "I'm on your side." A negative or flat tone of voice will say "I don't care" and "Leave me alone." Try not to sound impatient, superior, or bored. Putting some positivity into your voice will improve your interactions with your customers. It will give your customers confidence that you understand their needs and concerns and that you are there to help them.

The Customer Isn't Always Right

What do you do when the customer is wrong?

It's an old cliché that "the customer is always right." But anyone who has worked in customer service knows this isn't the case. Sometimes customers make mistakes or ask for things that aren't possible. What should you do when the customer is wrong? To begin, try to point out the mistake indirectly, and avoid placing blame. Treat it as an honest mistake. For instance, if a customer tries to use an expired coupon, point out the expiration date and explain the situation without making sarcastic comments or belittling him or her. One way to avoid placing blame is by using "I" statements instead of "You" statements. Instead of telling the customer, "You didn't see the expiration date," tell him or her, "We printed it at the bottom, but we probably should have made it a little bigger." Don't tell the customer he is wrong; instead, treat problems as simple miscommunications. However, be careful not to criticize your employer. You may push things to the opposite extreme, and make the customer think that your business is at fault. That can make them think you and your employer are irresponsible.

Angry customers

Sometimes a customer will be angry about a problem he or she has had with your business. The most important thing to do when dealing with an angry customer is to stay calm and reasonable. Don't yell back or argue. If need be, get the manager involved to mediate the discussion. You can use a simple, five-step process for dealing with angry customers:

1. **Control the volume and tone of your voice.** Don't act defensive or yell back. If you stay calm, it shows the customer you're interested in helping to solve the problem. It may even calm down the customer and bring his volume down.
2. **Let the customer vent.** Don't interrupt while the customer is venting her rage—that may make matters worse. Maintain eye contact and nod your head to show that you're listening as she tells you what's wrong.
3. **Listen, clarify, and align.** When the customer has finished telling you the problem, repeat it back. This will show you've understood what's going on. Align yourself with the customer: put yourself on his side and make it clear that you will work with him to find a solution.
4. **Offer a fair solution.** Remember, a happy customer is more likely to use your business again.
5. **Make up for the inconvenience.** Try to find a solution that addresses whatever inconveniences the customer has already experienced. Show that you understand the hassle and want to put things right.

These guidelines will help to streamline customer complaints. This will make your customers happy, but it will also make *you* happy. Stressed customers mean stressed employees, and resolving problems quickly and equitably will make your job much easier!

LUNCH: The basics of good customer service

Good customer service doesn't take much. Remember the acronym LUNCH for treating your customers in a professional and friendly manner:

- L: Listen** to your customer
- U: Understand** your product and your customer
- N: Meet the customer's needs**
- C: Care** for your customer
- H: Help** your customer

Review

- You are the public face of your employer's business—without you, the customers would disappear. Good customer service is a vital part of any business!
- Good customer service comes down to one thing: understanding your customers.
- Be friendly! Smile and use your customer's name.
- Listen to your customers. Be sure that you know what they're really asking for, and give them helpful responses.
- Choose your words carefully. Try to sound positive and enthusiastic. If your customer is asking for something impossible, don't say "no"—help to find a solution rather than just putting up a roadblock.
- Body language has a big impact on how your customers view you and your business. Face the customer and make eye contact, smile, stand up straight, and nod affirmatively to show you're listening.
- Your tone of voice is important, too. Make your voice sound enthusiastic rather than glum or bored.
- If the customer is wrong, avoid placing blame. Make "I" statements instead of "you" statements. Don't humiliate the customer, and try not to criticize your employer.
- When dealing with angry customer, control the volume and tone of your voice. Let the customer vent her anger. Listen, then repeat back what she says to show you understand the problem. Align with the customer to show you're on her side. Offer a fair solution, and make up for the inconvenience. You may need to bring in a manager to help mediate.

Questions For Discussion

1. What can an employee do to connect with customers?

Listen to customers; have interested body language; have a friendly tone of voice; call them by name when appropriate; listen to their concerns; never criticize an employer; answer questions about the product or service; keep details accurate. When dealing with an angry customer, repeat back the problem to show you've understood it, then align with the customer to show you're on his or her side.

2. Give examples of body language that communicates disinterest and boredom.

Dropping your head or resting it on your hands, slouching your shoulders, having a glum facial expressions, avoiding eye contact, and using a monotone voice all communicate a lack of interest or boredom.

3. Give examples of body language that communicates interest and a positive attitude.

Smiling, using open body gestures, nodding your head affirmatively, using direct eye contact, and making your voice sound pleasant, interested, and understandable all show that you have a positive attitude and are enthusiastic about helping your customers.

4. The customer isn't always right. How should you act when the customer is wrong?

Never tell the customer that he or she is wrong. Point out mistakes indirectly and avoid placing blame. Avoid sarcastic or belittling comments. Use "I" statements, not "You" statements. Avoid saying "no," and instead suggest alternatives. Show the customer that you are on his or her side and want to find a solution. Show that you understand the customer's point of view, but avoid criticizing your employer.

5. What steps can a worker use to respond to upset or angry customers?

Control the volume and tone of your voice; never yell back. Let the customer vent. Listen and clarify issues until you can repeat them back. Align yourself with the customer; understand and care about the customer's problem and work to resolve it. Offer a fair solution to the problem, and make up for the inconvenience.

6. What effects can good customer service have on a business? What about bad customer service?

Good customer service will help a business by making customers feel welcome. They'll be confident that the business has their best interests at heart and will help them to get what they need. Good customer service will ensure that your customers come back. Bad customer service, on the other hand, will drive customers away. Even if they actual goods or service they receive is satisfactory, they'll remember if they're ignored or treated rudely. Bad customer service can severely hurt a business.

Suggested Activities

1. For one week, keep a journal of your good and bad experiences as a customer. When you order a sandwich for lunch, shop for clothing, or go to the grocery store, pay attention to how the clerks and salespeople treat you. Note both good and bad experiences. What makes you feel valued as a customer? What makes you feel unwelcome? Taking these notes will help you to avoid the bad and remember the good when you're on the job.
2. Improvise! In pairs, do some role-playing with your classmates. One student should take the role of the customer, the other the employee. Think of potential problems, and use good customer service to resolve them.

Communicating With Customers

Fill-In-The-Blank

Fill in the blanks with the correct words from the bank at the bottom of the page.

Good customer service begins with friendliness. Putting a _____ on your face and using the customer's name shows that you're taking an interest in his or her needs. _____ with the customer to show that you're listening and understand what he or she is asking for. Be careful about how you phrase your responses—avoid sounding _____. Be aware the messages that your _____ language and _____ of voice send. When dealing with an angry customer, remain _____ and reasonable. _____ with the customer's position to show that you want to find a solution to the problem.

You can remember the basics of good customer service with this five-letter acronym:

_____ to your customer
_____ your product and your customer
Meet the customer's _____
_____ for your customer
_____ your customer

Word bank

Body	Needs	Connect	Understand	Calm
Smile	Listen	Align	Help	Tone
Care	Negative			

Communicating With Customers

Fill-In-The-Blank *Answer Key*

Fill in the blanks with the correct words from the bank at the bottom of the page.

Good customer service begins with friendliness. Putting a **smile** on your face and using the customer's name shows that you're taking an interest in his or her needs. **Connect** with the customer to show that you're listening and understand what he or she is asking for. Be careful about how you phrase your responses—avoid sounding **negative**. Be aware the messages that your **body** language and **tone** of voice send. When dealing with an angry customer, remain **calm** and reasonable. **Align** with the customer's position to show that you want to find a solution to the problem.

You can remember the basics of good customer service with this five-letter acronym:

Listen to your customer

Understand your product and your customer

Meet the customer's **n**eeds

Care for your customer

Help your customer

Communicating With Customers

Multiple Choice Worksheet

Circle the best available answer for each of the following:

- 1) Having slouched shoulders communicates that you are:
 - a) tired
 - b) interested and enthusiastic
 - c) bored and disinterested
 - d) overworked
- 2) An acronym for remembering the basics of good customer service is:
 - a) LUNCH
 - b) MUNCH
 - c) SNACK
 - d) SMILE
- 3) Show the customer that you are on his or her side when there is a problem by:
 - a) nodding affirmatively
 - b) aligning
 - c) repeating the problem back
 - d) all of the above
- 4) When a customer is angry, let him or her:
 - a) yell
 - b) vent
 - c) listen
 - d) align
- 5) You should try to make your tone of voice sound:
 - a) superior
 - b) indifferent
 - c) monotone
 - d) enthusiastic
- 6) Instead of saying "that's not my job," you should:
 - a) direct the customer to someone who can help
 - b) align with the customer
 - c) treat the problem as a miscommunication
 - d) let the customer vent
- 7) Avoid _____ your employer.
 - a) aligning with
 - b) criticizing
 - c) listening to
 - d) looking glum around
- 8) Bad customer service can:
 - a) drive away customers
 - b) provide equitable solutions
 - c) make your job less stressful
 - d) all of the above
- 9) You can make a customer feel confident by:
 - a) slouching your shoulders
 - b) having a flat tone of voice
 - c) avoiding eye contact
 - d) having a positive tone of voice
- 10) Using a calm tone of voice with an angry customer can:
 - a) escalate the situation
 - b) help to calm the customer down
 - c) signal disinterest and boredom
 - d) criticize your employer

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- b) vent**
- c) listen
- d) align

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- a) escalate the situation
- b) help to calm the customer down**
- c) signal disinterest and boredom
- d) criticize your employer

Communicating With Customers

Quiz

Match the words in the first column to the best available answer in the second column.

- | | | |
|-------|---|-----------------------|
| _____ | An example of body language that signals disinterest or boredom. | 1) align |
| _____ | An example of body language that signals interest and enthusiasm. | 2) tone of voice |
| _____ | When dealing with an angry customer, _____ with him to show you are on his side. | 3) criticize |
| _____ | When talking to customers, don't _____ your employer. | 4) understand |
| _____ | When answering a customer's question, try to give an _____ rather than an order. | 5) enthusiasm |
| _____ | Good customer service comes down to trying to _____ your customers. | 6) slouched shoulders |
| _____ | Smiling and nodding affirmatively are examples of body language that signals _____. | 7) smile |
| _____ | Your _____ can signal enthusiasm, boredom, or irritation. | 8) invitation |

Communicating With Customers

Quiz Answer Key

Match the words in the first column to the best available answer in the second column.

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| 6) slouched shoulders | An example of body language that signals disinterest or boredom. |
| 7) smile | An example of body language that signals interest and enthusiasm. |
| 1) align | When dealing with an angry customer, _____ with him to show you are on his side. |
| 3) criticize | When talking to customers, don't _____ your employer. |
| 8) invitation | When answering a customer's question, try to give an _____ rather than an order. |
| 4) understand | Good customer service comes down to trying to _____ your customers. |
| 5) enthusiasm | Smiling and nodding affirmatively are examples of body language that signals _____. |
| 2) tone of voice | Your _____ can signal enthusiasm, boredom, or irritation. |

For More Information...

Internet Resources

- Customer Service Training Skills**→ <http://www.customerservicetrainingskills.com/articles.php>
A collection of articles offering helpful tips on how to provide good customer service.
- The Customer Service Zone**→ <http://customerservicezone.com/>
A website run by customer relations expert Robert Bacal. Offers a wide range of resources on a variety of customer service topics. Includes resources intended for specific types of business, including small businesses, retail, real estate, and more.
- The Free Management Library: Customer Service**→
<http://www.managementhelp.org/customer/service.htm>
An overview of basic customer service concepts, with a brief bibliography.
- The Institute of Customer Service**→ <http://www.instituteofcustomerservice.com/>
The official website of the Institute of Customer Service, a professional organization for the customer service field. ICS has published several books as well as the magazine *Customerfirst*.

Print Resources

- Bacal, Robert. *Perfect Phrases for Customer Service: Hundreds of Tools, Techniques, and Scripts for Handling Any Situation*.** New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005.
Not sure what to say to a difficult customer? This book gives simple solutions and ready-to-use scripts for everyday customer service solutions.
- Carlaw, Peggy, and Vasudha Kathleen Deming. *The Big Book of Customer Service Training Games*.** New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999.
Carlaw and Deming present a variety of fun and engaging games to get your employees involved in learning how to connect with customers. The games include role-playing, charades, debates, and brainstorming sessions.
- Evenson, Renee. *Customer Service Training 101: Quick and Easy Techniques That Get Great Results*.** New York: Amacom, 2005.
This beginners' guide is a great resource for small business owners who want to learn the basics of customer service.
- Gee, Jeff and Val. *Super Service: Seven Keys to Delivering Great Customer Service ...Even When You Don't Feel Like It! ...Even When They Don't Deserve It!*** New York: McGraw-Hill, 1999.
This book isn't targeted at employers or managers, but at front-line customers who deal with customers every day. It's an upbeat, conversational book that your employees will find fun to read.