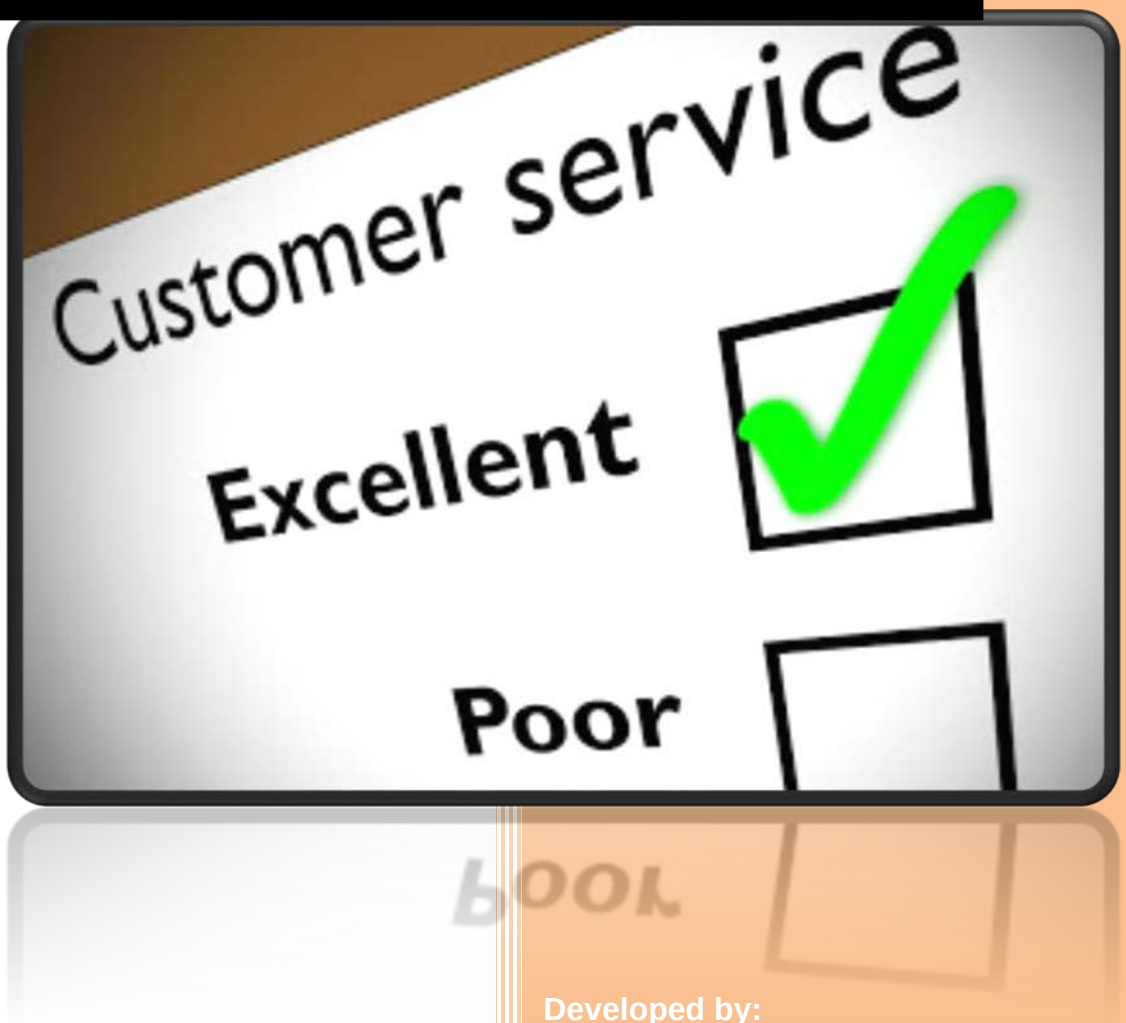
Customer Service Management



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The Customer Service Workplace

Customer Service Job Description

Simply put, the customer service worker (CSW) answers questions and solves problems. These tasks require solid listening and communication skills, and the ability to connect with customers through many different forms of media.

The foremost job of the CSW is to interact with customers, clients, constituents, and so forth on behalf of a company or organization. CSWs might provide information about products and services; they might also collect detail on a customer's complaints and help resolve them. And, CSWs might also take orders and handle returns or refunds.

There are more than 2 million customer service jobs in the United States alone. Here are some different types of customer service jobs:

- Receptionist/Front Desk Clerk
- Salesperson
- Insurance Agent
- Data Entry/Order Clerk
- Repair Service Technician
- Telemarketing Specialist
- Call Center Representative
- Counter & Rental Clerk
- Food Service Worker
- Travel Professional
- Child Care Provider
- Security Guard

A typical job description for a CSW might include these specific duties:

- Listen and respond to customers' needs and concerns.
- Provide information about products and services.
- Take orders, determine charges, and oversee billing or payments.
- Review or make changes to customer accounts.
- Handle returns or complaints.
- Record details of customer contacts and actions taken.
- Research answers or solutions as needed.
- Refer customers to supervisors, managers, or others who can help.

Customer service workers may work in a customer contact centers using telephones, email and live chat connections; or they might be stationed at service desks providing face-to-face service to customers on site. The CSWs may work from a manual that

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provides solutions and answers for most potential questions and problems. If an employee is unable to resolve a problem, she or he may turn to a team member or supervisor for assistance.

Some CSWs specialize in using a single mode of communication such as telephone, email, or chat; others are assigned to communicate with customers using several modes. As such, CSWs need to have solid communication skills, as well as up-to-date technical skills related to the various communication technologies and software programs.

Most every type of business and service agency provides customer service or support, and workers may need to develop specialized knowledge in a particular field such as banking, public utilities, consumer electronics, computer software, etc. CSWs in a retail store often may help customers learn how to use a product, or handle a return for defective or unsatisfactory purchases.

The Customer Service Workplace

Customer service workers in a contact center might be placed at a workstation, outfitted with a telephone, headset, and computer. These call centers may be very busy and noisy, with non-stop stressful work. Workers in a retail store might be equally busy, dealing with a long line of customers. Whether in person, on the phone, or over the computer, the customers are frequently frustrated and upset, and often angry and challenging.

Supervisors will closely assess the performance of the CSWs to ensure they are working efficiently and accurately. The supervisors may listen in on telephone calls, monitor online communications, and review records of customer interactions.

Most CSWs hold fulltime jobs, and must be prepared to work a variety of shifts as an increasing number of companies provide 24-hour support service. It is common for employers to require CSWs to work weekends, holidays, and rotating day/evening shifts. In retail stores, weekends and holidays may be the most demanding time for customer services.

Qualifications and Preparation

Most CSWs have a high school diploma. They must also have good communication and interpersonal abilities, and fundamental computer and telephone skills. They typically receive some on-the-job training before assuming their duties.

The customer-service-workplace training may last from two weeks to several months if there is specialized knowledge about an industry or product the worker must learn. The

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training may include background about the company and its services or products, the typical customer issues and questions, the communication systems that may be used, and other matters specific to a given position.

Training, which might take place in a combination of classroom and workplace settings, might be counted as paid time. Since products and services are constantly changing, additional training may well be an ongoing process.

Since some products and services, such as banking and highly regulated industries, are more complicated to learn, some CSWs might be preferred or required to have some college education or a degree. CSWs who work with insurance or financial companies may be required to pass written exams and hold special licenses. Preparatory training for such industry-specific requirements is often provided by employers.

Important Skillsets

This course aims to help develop the skills necessary to become an effective and successful CSW. These abilities often need to be bundled into a set of skills to meet the demands of employers, customers, and the situation at hand. We will be further addressing these skillsets in the materials ahead:

Communication skillsets. A CSW must engage sensitive listening and speaking skills to accurately assess and respond to a customers' questions and needs. The worker needs to be comfortable with communication media including telephone calls, email, and live chat; and be able to communicate clearly and accurately, with proper use of written and spoken styles.

Problem-solving skillsets. To help resolve customer issues, the CSW needs to be able to analyze problems, research answers, and help customers implement solutions. These problem-solving skillsets may be considerably expanded for positions such as computer support specialists, bank tellers, financial advisors, and other positions requiring special studies and certifications.

Customer-service skillsets*.* A CSW needs to handle questions and problems with a friendly and professional demeanor. Customers may come from many different backgrounds, be frustrated and confused, be angry and difficult—so the CSW needs to be patient, understanding, sympathetic, polite, and create a positive relationship to help resolve the problem at hand, and represent the company well to help ensure good ongoing business standing.

Summary

- The job of the customer service worker is to answer questions, resolve issues, and provide customer satisfaction.

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- Customer service workers provide a number of functions in most every industry, sometimes working face-to-face, other times in customer service centers using telephone and computer technology.
- The typical customer service job is fulltime, and frequently doesn't require more than a high school diploma.
- Most customer service positions will require some in-house training, and possible licensure depending on the nature of the job.
- Important skillsets to develop in this course include communication, problem solving, and specific customer service tactics.

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Creating Favorable Impressions

The Importance of Favorable Customer Service

Studies show there are a number of reasons a business may lose customers. Some customers move away, some go to the competition, and some are simply dissatisfied. But the largest majority—close to 70 percent of customers who leave a company for good—say the primary reason was because of bad service from just one employee!

Keeping repeat customers is just good business: it can cost five times as much to attract a new customer as it costs to keep an old one. Great customer service from every member on a company's team is essential to customer retention.

Enhancing Customer Impressions and Satisfaction

There are certain practices that create the most favorable impressions with customers, and help ensure their needs have been met. The foremost of these is to give your customer your full attention, and handle their questions or complaints effectively.

Let your customers feel at that moment, there is nothing more important to you than helping them. You may have a line of other customers needing assistance at your help desk, or a number of callers waiting in the queue. Still, you can only serve one customer at a time, and the customer you are serving *now* should feel that he or she has your full attention and focus.

Furthermore, you should get to know your customer as well as you can within the constraints of the moment. Know the customer's name and use it, using Mr. or Ms. and their last name, or their first name if appropriate. Know their home city, their immediate need, and certainly why they're turning to you for help. Give them special and personalized attention, and they'll most likely appreciate you for it.

While you should always aim to adequately meet customer expectations, it helps to do the unexpected as well. Give your customers a follow-up call or email to make sure their problem has been resolved. Send them a coupon for an upcoming sale item, or throw in an extra item for free.

Two other important customer service tactics are to 1) talk about benefits, not features. Customers don't need to know all the technical aspects of a product, but how is it going to improve their lives. And 2) know your competition; not to criticize them, but to better understand some of the options your customer may be considering. There may even be a time when you will recommend a competitor's service or product if it better meets your

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customer's needs. If they feel you are putting their best interests above your own, you will certainly win your customers' appreciation!

All of these steps lead to three phrases that help ensure the highest level of customer service: *listen, empathize*, and *take charge*. To listen best, give your full attention to your customer and be sure to hear all the issues that may need to be addressed.

Empathize (rather than just sympathize) to assure the customers you understand and want to help. One customer service student suggested a way to discern between sympathy and empathy: *sympathy* is when you say "I feel bad *for* you"; *empathy* is when you say "I feel bad *with* you."

Finally, you take charge of the problem, so your customers feel they have a champion on their side. It is no longer just the *customer's* problem, but *our* problem that you have a vested interest in resolving.

So, to recap the steps toward favorable customer impressions and satisfaction:

- Give your customers your full attention, dealing with one customer at a time.
- Handle customer complaints efficiently and effectively.
- Know your customer.
- Give customers special treatment.
- Do the unexpected.
- Talk about benefits, not features.
- Know your competition.
- Listen, empathize, and take charge.

Affecting Customer Loyalty

As mentioned earlier, it costs much less to keep satisfied customers returning to your business, than it costs to get them there in the first place. By assuring favorable impressions and customer satisfaction, you win their loyalty.

Customers likely judge a company by the person they are interacting with—at this point all the money spent on marketing, product development, and management comes down to how happy the customers are with the service they receive. The attitude of the customer service worker (CSW) is what counts above all else: even it's only a smile, friendly eye contact, and a few supportive words.

The best CSWs look for opportunities to help. They've made it their mission in life to make a positive difference in the world around them, one customer at a time. They are

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on the lookout for people who may need extra levels of attention—elderly people, parents with babies in tow, people with disabilities, people with high levels of anxiety.

The best CSWs respect their customers. They give their customers the necessary time and attention to resolve concerns and meet needs. They make their customers feel like valued partners in the company's success, not just account numbers and statistics.

These CSWs listen, empathize, and take charge.

If you can do this, you will surely be a valued member of your company's team providing high levels of customer service. You will win the loyalty of your valuable customers. And you will become the kind of person who succeeds at every level of the company as you advance through the ranks over the years.

Summary

- The majority of customers who leave a company do so as a result of poor customer service from a single person.
- It costs five times as much to obtain a new customer as it does to retain an old one.
- The best way to create a favorable impression is to give a customer your full attention and handle their questions or complaints effectively.
- The three key phases of customer service are to listen, empathize, and take charge.
- The best CSWs look for opportunities to help, respect their customers, and treat their customers as valued partners in the company's success.

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Understanding the Customer

What the Customer Wants

Perhaps the most effective way to find out what customers want is simply to ask them. Customers have been asked in surveys what it is they're looking for, and their responses are not surprising. The primary response from customers is they want to receive polite, helpful service. They aren't expecting extra special treatment, or to be overwhelmed with multiple offers of assistance—in fact, some customers may find excessive attention to be intrusive or offensive.

Nonetheless, they do report wanting to feel appreciated as a customer, and they want a pleasant attitude from their service provider, even if it may not necessarily be sincere.

What does send them out the door to a competitor is an attitude of indifference. Even worse is when a customer service worker (CSW) treats a customer with hostility, for whatever reason.

A customer typically wants to complete a transaction as quickly as possible, minimizing the amount of time and energy it takes to serve a need or resolve a problem. Toward that end, you might look at the customer more as your partner in the transaction: how can we best help one another accomplish our immediate goal, so we can get to the next thing on our list?

Of course, some customers may be wanting more from an interaction; perhaps they live alone and you are their only human connection that day. In that case, to the extent possible, if you are able to offer an extra bit of time to the contact, you may not only gain a loyal customer, but may also help a lonely person live just a bit happier. If you follow the model of *listen, empathize*, and *take control*, there is often some room to connect with a customer a little beyond the call of duty, before you slip into the control mode to complete the interaction.

It may well be a supervisor is watching your interaction with a customer. At some point, you can be sure someone is observing and assessing your performance. Even though there will always be pressure to accomplish as much as possible within a reasonable amount of time, a good supervisor should appreciate your dedication to excellent customer service, and you will be recognized for your commitment to the customer as well as to the success of your company. By committing yourself to the best service you

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can provide within the constraints of your position, you might ultimately be recognized both professionally and personally.

What the Customer Needs

Along with understanding what a customer *wants*, it also is important to address what it is a customer *needs*. Quite often customers aren't sure exactly what they need to do, only that they have a problem: it is your job to help find a resolution. It may be they simply need to better understand their purchased service or product. In that case, they may need to be educated with a simple and clear explanation.

Other times a customer may need to have a defective item replaced with one that works or better suits their particular needs. If you understand your customer's requirements as well as your company's offerings, this is usually an easy fix.

Sometimes, the customer may simply need to return an item or cancel a service. If you handle this need well, they may purchase a replacement item right then, or return later since you've won their loyalty with considerate service.

As a CSW, it is your job to help your customers find the solutions that best serve their needs, clearly explain the options, make a best recommendation, and then take control to implement an agreed upon action. Handled conscientiously, everyone comes out a winner.

Serving a Customer's Needs and Wants

It is up to you as a CSW to understand the needs of your customers, the particulars of your company's services or products, and the options you may be able to present to your customer. Maintain focus on what you are *able* to do for your customer (rather than what you *aren't able* to do). Assume ownership of the customer's needs or problem. Be clear and specific as you ask questions and make suggestions. Offer a clear resolution to the problem. Keep the interaction cordial and respectful. Make sure your customers feel respected and appreciated for bringing their business to you.

There is a saying: before I care what you *know*, I want to know that you *care*. Once customers feel you are on their side and that your mission is to help them find satisfaction, your job is half way done.

Summary

- Most customers say they simply want polite and helpful service.

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- A good customer service strategy is to work with your customers as partners in the quick, smooth, satisfactory completion of a transaction.
- Some customers may need a little more attention to satisfy their particular needs.
- You may never know when you are being observed by a supervisor. The best practice is to always give you top effort to create a satisfied customer.
- A CSW must also help identify a customer's needs, even if the customer is not able to articulate what these needs are.
- Customer needs might include explanations on how a product or service works; replacement of a product; and return or cancellation of a product or service.
- A good CSW assumes ownership of a customer's issue until it is resolved.

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Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

Communication Modes

All the tools and efforts of the customer service worker (CSW) come down to how effectively we communicate with the customers we serve, both verbally and nonverbally. With verbal communication, we can make our *meaning* understood through syntax (word order and phrasing) and semantics (word choice and meaning). Are we being clear with our word choice? Are we speaking at a proper pace and volume? Does our voice sound friendly and calm?

With nonverbal communication, we can make our *attitude* understood. Are we standing in a self-assured yet non-threatening way? Are we maintaining a comfortable level of eye contact? Are we engaging with our gestures? Do we project warmth and concern?

Verbal Communication Techniques

Not everyone has the voice of a broadcast reporter, but everyone can employ tactics to help hold the attention of a listener. Speak with short words: our customers may be highly educated, but when it comes to their particular product or needs, you are the expert and should gently help them understand potentially confusing concepts.

Some customers may be hard of hearing, but this can be difficult to know, especially over the telephone. If they tilt their head or frequently ask you to repeat yourself, they may not be hearing you well, and you can try speaking a little louder. If they back away, or move their head back, you may be speaking too loudly. The customer may also prefer to converse in quieter tones if he or she is nervous or is concerned about privacy when other people are nearby.

Another important aspect of verbal communication is our speech rate. A good speech rate is about 120–150 words a minute; that comes to about two words a second. This may sound fast, but it really isn't. If you count the to 30 seconds using the *one-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, three-one-thousand* method, you will be speaking about four syllables (or two words) a second. Try it, and that will simulate an appropriate rate of speech when explaining important or challenging information to a customer.

A good general rule is to mimic the customer's volume and speech rate, both of which might help you understand your customer's communicative preferences. It is a matter of

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being sensitive to a customer's reaction, and gauging your own volume and rate accordingly.

Nonverbal Communication Techniques

Much of our communication is not so much in *what* we say, but in *how* we say it. For effective nonverbal communication, you want to convey that you are self-confident, capable, and in control of the situation. You don't want to communicate that you are aggressive, superior, or domineering.

You can express yourself best by using effective nonverbal and physical techniques. Present a calm relaxed face, especially if your customer seems agitated, confused, or angry. Smile warmly and try to put some friendliness in your eyes. Maintain intermittent eye contact, although it is important to understand that the meaning of this varies by culture: some people may hold longer eye contact to demonstrate openness and sincerity, while other cultures don't hold eye contact at all, and may see an attempt to do so as a threatening gesture. Adjust your approach based on your observations of your customer and your understanding of the situation.

Stand erect, but don't tower over your customers or lean into their personal space. Use gentle and open-handed gestures, rather than gestures that may be abrupt or aggressively close handed.

There is also paralanguage, which you can use to engage your customer. This means the sounds you make, rather than spoken words, such as *uh-huh, ahh,* and *huh?* These sounds encourage your customers, and assure them that you're listening and engaged. This is especially important if you are talking on the telephone, and your customer is unable to confirm visually that he or she has your attention. And when communicating over the phone don't forget, the tone of your voice can be very expressive.

The most important aspects of both verbal and nonverbal communication are to work toward a mutual understanding, make your customer feel at ease, and ultimately ensure your interaction has a productive and satisfying end.

Summary

- Verbal and nonverbal tactics play an important role in effective customer communication.
- Verbal communication makes our meaning understood. Nonverbal communication makes our attitude understood.
- We should use short words for best understanding, and adjust our speaking volume to a level that seems effective for each customer and circumstance.
- A good speech rate is 120-150 words per minute—a little slower than our normal speaking speed might be—especially when communicating important or difficult information.

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- If we mimic our customers' speaking volume and speed, this may help to judge the most effective approach to take with them.
- Nonverbal communication such as body language relays much information about our attitude to a customer.
- We should stand with a confident yet non-threatening posture, smile with a calm face, maintain appropriate eye contact, use open gestures, and use paralanguage to encourage customers while they're speaking.

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Extraordinary Customer-Service Situations

Extraordinary Customer-Service Problems

Many of the situations that a customer service worker (CSW) handles will pose a certain degree of difficulty, which is why the company has hired and trained a professional such as you to fill the post. A customer might be extremely agitated from dealing with a defective product or service. The customer might have been referred to several different workers or departments before they wind up with the customer service team, increasing their agitation even further. There may have been a miscommunication of a company's offer, and many expectant customers must be redirected or turned away. Alternatively, probably the worst scenario, someone may have been injured by your company's product.

Sometimes, the customer's problem can be more challenging than his or her reaction to it. Here are some of the more sensitive problems that a CSW might encounter:

- An urgent order was not delivered on time, causing extreme inconvenience and even great expense to a business customer.
- Your company shipped the wrong part, and now your customer is faced with a time-consuming return and re-send process.
- One of your team members mistreated a customer.
- False assurances or promises were offered to a customer that must now be rectified.
- A customer has suffered repeated breakdowns of purchased equipment.
- Your company failed to fulfill a special request.

It is essential to respond to these special problems with care, even if the customer does not seem to be particularly upset over the situation. Rather than complaining, about half of all customers who experience service problems will simply take their business elsewhere. The average business loses approximately 15% of customers each year due to unsatisfactory service. A customer's problem might also indicate a greater issue within your company that needs addressed, before even more customers are impacted.

Furthermore, you can assume unsatisfied customers will be sharing their unhappy experiences with their colleagues and friends, and that may cost a company

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considerably more in bad public relations. This is especially critical since the word of past customers can carry much more weight than a company's best advertising efforts. Moreover, with customer ratings available on many online sources, each bad comment can reach vast numbers of current and potential customers.

Fixing Extraordinary Customer –Service Problems

Most special problems can be remedied with the same basic tactics you apply to any customer service situation: Listen to your customer's explanation of an issue clearly, take ownership of the problem, and turn the problem's solution into a partnership—you and the customer working together to achieve a speedy resolution and satisfaction. As with every other aspect of customer service, this requires effective communication, a positive attitude, and your demonstrated commitment to fix whatever is wrong.

You might also need to take the issue to a higher level, especially in the event that a problem could result in legal liability for your company. During your training phase for a customer service position, you likely will be instructed on the situations that warrant an immediate referral to a supervisor.

Among the very first steps once you have identified your customer's special problem is to offer an apology, with sincere remorse for a customer's inconvenience. Then, apologize again. A simple apology may go a long way in defusing a customer's agitation. Don't argue with the customer, don't try to make excuses, and certainly don't try to place blame for a situation back on the customer.

Ultimately, you should try to counter the depth of a customer's disappointment and inconvenience with a sufficient level of remediation, equal to the customer's loss. Your company's policies might detail possible remedies and compensations, such as a full and immediate refund, a discount on service for a given period, or a discount on a future purchase. Offering these and other alternatives may require assistance from your supervisor.

As you identify possible solutions to your customer's problem, you should carefully help your customer assess and choose among the options that may be available. By bringing your customers into the process as a participating partner, you empower them and given them a sense they still have control over a situation that may have left them feeling powerless.

As you resolve service problems, try to exceed your customer's expectations, to the extent possible. Most importantly, try to return your customer to a reasonable state of satisfaction, and be sure to provide a follow-up to ensure that your customer remains satisfied. And keep in mind, the results of an unresolved customer problem can have ramifications and costs far beyond the immediate issue at hand.

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Summary

- Some customer service issues are routine such as return of a defective product. Other problems may pose special issues that need to be handled with extra care.
- Companies may lose 15% of their customers every year due to poorly resolved problems.
- Unsatisfied customers who complain to friends and online may cost a company even more business.
- A sincere apology can help alleviate a customer's agitation.
- The resolution to a customer's problem should equal or exceed the customer's loss.

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Handling Challenging Customers

Dealing with Difficult Customers

With some customer service problems, your customer might remain calm and reasonable no matter how upset they might actually be. In other situations, no matter how trivial the problem, your customer will be difficult, demanding, angry, rude, and even potentially violent. Short of hanging up or calling security, there are certain fundamental yet important steps you can take to deal with difficult customers.

One of the first steps when dealing with a challenging customer is to protect yourself with the proper mindset and attitude. Just because your customer is agitated or angry does not mean you need to absorb it or respond in kind. Studies show that just a few minutes of a strong negative emotion such as anger can demolish your body's immune system for many hours afterward. Remember you cannot always control how a customer reacts to a given problem, but you can control how you respond. Rather than escalate an unpleasant situation, you can try some tactics to defuse it. You can do this by remaining focused, alert, understanding, caring, unemotional, and—most of all—patient.

Defusing Customer Misbehavior

Earlier in the course, we considered just what it is a customer wants. The answer applies to upset customers just as much as any other: treat them with respect and polite, helpful service. There is an ancient adage that a gentle word turns away wrath, and that's as true today. A rude, angry, or belligerent customer might be calmed with a simple, "I'm sorry this has upset you … let's see how we can fix it."

It's when dealing with difficult customers that your communication skills will be put to the highest test. It may be best to let your customer vent a little before you come back with a response. Remember to speak slowly, use short sentences, be tactful, and follow the golden model of customer service: *listen, empathize*, and *take charge*.

It helps to use a customer-centric perspective that puts you in the place of your customer. Try to see the situation as they do. What exactly is causing them stress? What are the solutions they might find satisfactory? How can you apply those solutions with minimum effort?

You should also employ tactics of effective listening. This helps your customers feel their message is coming through, and you understand their problem clearly. The first

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step is to smile, to show you are a friendly ally sent to fix the problem. Smile even if you are on the phone—that gesture might come through in your voice. Do not interrupt while your customer is explaining a problem, other than to help clarify an issue. If it's in person, lean toward your customers and turn an ear their way to show you are intently listening. Especially if it's a conversation on the telephone, be sure to use affirmative words and sounds such as *uh-huh, yes, I see,* to demonstrate that you are listening, and to encourage your customer to continue.

Customer Service Do's and Don'ts

Before we discuss best tips on what to do when dealing with difficult customers, let's first consider some important things *not* to do. As mentioned earlier, be sure not to get angry yourself, even if the customer starts to attack you personally as *uncaring* or *incompetent*. Your employer hired you because you have demonstrated both an aptitude for customer service and the skills to perform your job well. The customer is responding with a perspective muddled by emotion, and you must keep that in mind.

You should also avoid telling your customer to calm down. That may make you appear adversarial to agitated customers, rather than as a helper trying to understand how they feel. Likewise, don't feel a need to defend yourself. This can also create an adversarial relation. Rather, try to assure your customers you hear their concern, and you sincerely want to help.

Try not to interrupt your customers, especially while they're venting some of their anger. Once they have raged for a bit, they may be easier to ration with if you simply acknowledge their anger, and let them share some of it with you.

That said, let's summarize a roster of best tips to settle an upset customer, including a review of some points we may have considered earlier:

- Show empathy for customers' problems. Let the customers know their problems concern you as well (without letting it actually upset you, of course). Remember to use the magic words, "I'm sorry."
- Encourage an extremely agitated customer to vent a little before initiating steps to resolve the problem. You can use such phrases as "tell me about what happened."
- Don't take a customer's anger or insults personally. Instead, show you are on the customer's side. You might say something like, "I can understand why you're upset."
- Remain objective and calm. Take responsibility and keep a focus on achieving results. Assure the customer, "I'm sure we can fix this."

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- Involve the customer. This returns a sense of empowerment to a customer who may be feeling powerless. Ask, “How would you like to see this resolved?”
- Provide clear options and steps to a resolution. Say, “Here is what we are going to do.”
- Exceed a customer’s expectations. Let the customer know, “… and here is what else we have for you.”
- Finally, assure the customer that you will advise management of the problem to prevent a similar situation in the future.

If you can apply these simple tips, you might be able to handle most of the difficult customer interactions that come your way. And, the final best tip: when in need, call for help! Your supervisor and coworkers will be quick to come to your aid. Someday, they may call on you for your service skills and cool head.

Summary

- An attitude of calm detachment can help you deal with difficult customers.
- A little empathy and an apology are often the best tools to defuse an upset customer.
- When dealing with angry customers, employ active listening skills, and assure them you’re on their side.
- Don’t get caught up in a customer’s personal attacks.
- Turn the interaction to a focus on fixing an issue, empowering the customer to help seek suitable solutions.
- Exceed the customer’s expectations.

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Working with Customer Diversity

Customer Diversity

Whether you are working in a customer-service calling center serving a global audience, or staffing the customer service desk in a neighborhood retail store, you will most certainly be working with a broad range of customers. You will encounter different languages, cultural backgrounds, age groups, genders, and communication styles.

Almost everyone you interact with will have a different preference for interpersonal modes and customs. As a skilled customer service worker (CSW), it will be your duty to connect with them in the way that best serves their needs, and your company's interests, in the most efficient and effective way possible.

Chances are you already have developed solid skills for communicating across cultural and demographic differences. Within your family, you may have a more informal way of communicating with siblings and cousins, while offering greater deference to your parents, aunts and uncles, and grandparents. As a student, you likely had classmates from number of different cultural backgrounds, coming from different heritages, social customs, and religious beliefs. You may not have had to change your own mode of interaction, but you were still able to find common ground in order to get along and possibly even form friendships.

As a CSW, you will need to modify your method of interaction to communicate well with your differing customers. Some may prefer you to assume a more authoritative communication style, with you taking (respectful) control of the interaction from start to finish. Others may expect a more passive approach, allowing them to lead the interaction up to the point where you are expected to resolve the matter with a deferential tone, perhaps even with a *yes sir*, or a *yes ma'am*. The primary goal is to achieve a satisfied customer, with minimum effort and maximum results on your part.

For example, people coming from different nations and cultures have various levels of the *power-distance* dimension—or the distances they believe to exist between different levels of a society. Some cultures have a very high power-distance perspective, and they may well treat you with a certain disregard or even disdain. Cultures with a lower power-distance dimension may see you as a social equal, and will treat you with the same courtesy and respect you offer them in return. A large part of your job is not to judge the merits of cultural differences or change them, but to accommodate them in a way—within reason—that best serves your customer.

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One of the biggest errors you might make is to try to apply your own cultural beliefs without modification to every customer from every background, which will most certainly lead to frustrated efforts, conflict, bad service, and ultimately a lost customer for your business. As time goes by and with experience, you will become ever better at reading your customers and swiftly modifying your approach as necessary to accommodate the differing demands of a situation.

Serving Diverse and Multicultural Customers

There are a number of tactics you can employ to ensure optimal communication with regard to linguistic, cultural, and demographic factors. The most important of these is, don't assume your listeners understand your explanation of an issue simply because they may smile, nod their heads, or say *yes* when you ask them if you've made yourself clear. If your customer is a non-native English speaker, it's possible "yes" may be the only word he or she can say with any confidence.

We take many things for granted: the slang and idioms of our language, the specific vocabulary of a trade, a speaking rate most non-native speakers find excessively fast. To communicate with a non-native English speaker, be sure to use simple Standard English. Keep your messages brief. If it seems your listener misunderstands a word or phrase, try rephrasing it one or two other ways. Use short bits of information, and confirm understanding before you go on. If you have a member on your team who speaks your customer's language and can help, that's all the better.

Be very careful with humor or slang that does not translate well across cultures; even if your customer understands the words, he or she may not understand the context or implied meaning. If you laugh, they may think you are laughing at them, rather than at a misunderstood joke. What you may interpret as wit, they may interpret as an insult.

Also, be careful with your gestures. Many cultures perceive the *OK* sign or a *thumbs-up* as insults. Some cultures are very reserved with their physical movements and body language. Other cultures may gesticulate vividly without meaning to convey agitation.

The most effective way to approach customers' diversity is to apply the Two Golden Rules of Customer Service: *1) find out what customers want,* and *2) treat them how they want to be treated.* Try to approach all interactions with a foremost desire to satisfy a customer, setting aside any of your own rigid opinions of how things should be done. Most of all, you should offer respect for the diverse behaviors and different customs among your customers, even though you may not understand (or even approve of) them.

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If you can relax, enjoy, and even learn from the rich cultural and social differences you encounter, you will be well on your way to skillfully serving the wide spectrum of customers you are likely to engage.

Summary

- CSWs should be comfortable interacting with people from a wide range of cultural and demographic backgrounds.
- The CSW might need to adjust forms of verbal and nonverbal communication according to the cultural comfort of a customer.
- Use of humor, gestures, and levels of assertive behavior are culturally sensitive.
- An effective approach to customer service is to discern how customers want to be treated, and then treat them accordingly.
- Professional and effective CSWs will set aside preconceived notions of "correct" behavior while respecting the cultural or demographic differences of the customers they serve.

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Customer Service Telephone Skills

Telephonic Services

The defining lines between the *telephone* and *telephonic services* are becoming blurrier with rapid innovations in communications. We may be speaking to a friend or customer on an actual corded telephone, a smart cell phone, over a tablet via Skype, through any number of computer-based *voice over internet protocols* (VoIP), webcams, online meeting platforms, and other such services. For the sake of this lesson, telephonic communication is considered any type of voice-to-voice communication (with or without a video component).

For the most part, unless there is a camera involved, we have no visual cues to help us better assess the person on the other line. We can't see if they are smiling, frowning, gesturing, multitasking, or playing a video game. This can actually be a help, as understanding the customer's problem requires focus on the specific words spoken and the tone in their voice. Sometimes the visuals can be an irrelevant distraction if we are making judgments based on dress or hairstyle, or if we are misinterpreting facial expressions.

It's important to remember as we speak with a customer telephonically that we are trying to decrease customer anxiety and dissatisfaction, not increase it with some of the frustrations of the technology. There are a number of tactics we can use to put our customer at ease, while still taking advantage of the power of telephonic systems.

Telephonic Communication Tactics

Since we typically have no visual cues when speaking on the phone, it is essential we use tone of voice and careful word selection to connect with our customers. We should use a calm, friendly voice to convey warmth and concern—seeking as always to form a partnership with customers to find a resolution to their problems. The tone of our voice should project our dedication to the customer, with enthusiasm and competency.

We should speak clearly using a normal volume, with short words and sentences so as not to overwhelm the potentially frustrated and anxious customer. A good tip is to set our volume, speech rate, and vocabulary level to match those of our customer. Some customers may be quite knowledgeable on a given issue, so we don't want them to feel as if we are talking down to them. Think of a standard rate of speech as about 140 words per minute, or approximately 4 syllables per second (at about this pace: *one-thousand-one; one-thousand-two; one-thousand-three*—each number string lasting a second each). You may slow it down or speed it up to meet the style of your customer, but it's a good place to start.

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For any customer, one of the most frustrating aspects of telephonic services is dealing with the web of automatic menu options, along with voice mailboxes and call transfers. The customer may be overwhelmed and upset by the process of simply trying to connect with *you*. An upfront apology for an inefficient automated system may help calm the first moments of your call.

The best-case resolution to a telephone call is that you are able to quickly discern the customer's issue, describe the options, pick a suitable resolution with the customer's participation, and fix any problem. However, quite often it may be case where you will need to transfer the customer to someone else on your team—perhaps a specialized service worker, a supervisor, or an entirely different department. After your work building an effective rapport with the customer, he or she may find a transfer upsetting. You can alleviate the *transfer stress* with a few preliminary steps.

First, explain the need for the transfer to your customers, and ask their permission to do so. Once again, it comes back to involving your customers through each step as a partner in the solution to their problems. If you need to put the customer on hold, be sure to check in every 20–30 seconds with an update on your progress. If the customer feels ignored, gets frustrated, hangs up and calls back, the process may need to begin all over again at step one—only this time with an even-more agitated caller.

Avoid any transfer where the customer will have to explain an issue all over again to another customer service worker or supervisor. When you return to your customer after finding the proper connection, be sure to thank him or her for waiting, and apologize if necessary for any excessive delay. Take time to introduce the customer to whomever is receiving the call transfer, confirm the new representative has been informed of the issue, and assure the customer that a resolution is imminent.

Most all of us have been in the frustrating position of working through a company's phone system, being placed on long holds, repeating our issue over and over again with each transfer, and being disconnected during a transfer—only to have to start the process again. It isn't hard for us to put ourselves in our customer's place as they deal with similar frustrations. By our efforts at empathy and with efficient procedures, we can turn the telephone interaction into an effective tool for serving our customer and our company smoothly and productively.

Summary

- Telephone and telephonic communications can include many different types of equipment and connecting platforms.
- In the absence of visual cues, our voice and the voice of our customers become the essential medium of communication. We should speak at a proper rate of speed and volume, with a tone that conveys commitment and competency.

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- Ask for permission from customers before placing them on hold, initiating a transfer, and connecting them with a new service representative. Introduce them to the new contact, and inform them that you have explained their problem to the new representative.
- Be sure to thank your customers for their patience, apologize for any delays, and assure them that a solution to their problem is on its way.

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Customer Service through E-mail and the Internet

E-Communications

For the sake of this lesson, we shall consider e-mails, social media postings, replies to corporate website posts, and other forms of writing for online platforms as *e-communications*. Writing for an online platform typically has a very different style and structure than communications such as memos, letters, reports, and other documents that may have a wider distribution or more formal purpose. As more offices and entire companies go paperless, it becomes all the more critical to develop writing skills for electronic media.

We should not think of e-mails and website posts as transient bits of communication. Indeed, e-mails and social media postings may last well after a hard-copy letter, fax, or piece of direct mail has been discarded. Ironically, we often spend much less time preparing digital messages that may sit indefinitely in electronic memory than we do on those disposable paper versions.

By their nature and necessity, electronic communications such as e-mails and forum posts are typically brief, focusing on a key point or two; yet they attempt to convey complete messages without a need for ongoing back-and-forth follow-ups. That's where the challenge lies: constructing a message that is concise yet comprehensive.

Furthermore, when sent without the inclusion of a few social pleasantries, short messages have the potential to be received as also short in temperament, and that shortness may be interpreted as rudeness or disrespect. Fortunately, as we become more comfortable with such forms of communication, we've also become much better at accommodating the limitations of the format.

Another potential problem, when customers are at a computer, their attention may be spread between several tasks: other incoming messages, searching a competitor's website, or trying to mute a video playing in the background. As such, your message has to earn their attention, succinctly convey necessary detail, avoid misinterpretation and ambiguity, and maintain a tone of cordial service. It's a big order, but a few tips can help you get the job done.

The first tip is to use template copy where possible. This copy through trial and error may be cleaned up of possible ambiguities, and field-tested for effectiveness. Many of the issues you deal with, such as explanation of a common software function, or an apology for late delivery of a product, will present themselves over, and over.

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Personalize the template copy as necessary, and in ways that may help your message appear fresh and relevant (such as, “Mr. Sanchez, Thank you for your phone call this morning regarding the late delivery of your refrigerator. We are very sorry for any inconvenience this may have caused …”)

You must carefully consider how to open and close your message. In business communications, you may well prefer a simple opening acknowledgement of the recipient, as in *Mr. Sanchez* or *Ms. Smith*, or their first name for a little more informality; followed with a comma and paragraph break, then the start of your message. Adding a *Hi* or *Hello* adds a friendlier tone, and may be appropriate for ongoing follow-up communications or if your company prefers a friendlier touch. The use of *Dear* seems colloquial and a throwback to more formal written letters, and is not used as often in electronic communications. Certainly informal salutations such as *Hey* and ‘*Sup* should be kept to friends, family, and familiar business associates; not formal customer service communications.

Likewise, a suitable closing would simply be your name signature, however even in business communications a cordial tone is added with a *Best regards* or *We look forward to serving you in the future*, rather than an abrupt ending that may be misinterpreted as indifference. While you may like to get creative with your personal communications, the best bet in business is to stick with openings and closings that are simple, cordial, clear—and most importantly, brief.

Next, get to your point quickly, clearly, and without unnecessary clutter that tires the reader trying to untangle your message. For example, here is the sort of message you would *not* want to send:

> Hi, Mary. How are you? I hope all is well. We haven’t seen you since the last time, but we hope to see you soon.
>
> FWIW, my house is on fire. The flames are beginning to get closer to me and the dog, and the fire has already burned that nice painting you gave me for my birthday. That was a fun party.
>
> And BTW, please send help. I wish I had bought those fire extinguishers when they were on sale when we went shopping. Did that sweater you bought fit OK?
>
> We hope you can come to dinner for the holidays … if our house is still standing. Maybe you can bring that wonderful fruit salad of yours.
>
> Love, John

Obviously, the key message here is *Fire! Send Help!* You can save the pleasantries until later over lunch, and no one will fault you for brevity. Your e-mail or online posting should cover one or two critical topics or instructions. If you need to cover more than that, it may be better to write a separate message. Remember you want your readers to spend their limited attention doing what needs to be done, not dissecting your message.

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Be sure to use a descriptive subject heading, so the intent of your message is clear. This helps your reader decide to open your e-mail or posting, and search it out again if necessary. A few samples:

- Re: Your Refrigerator Purchase
- Re: Your Software Issue
- Re: Your Package Delivery
- Re: My House is On Fire!

It helps to write in smaller paragraphs, so as not to overwhelm your reader with big blocks of text. It also is critical that you to keep your message focused, with succinct writing in smaller bits of information.

And though you may be working under tight time constraints, it's a good idea to pause before hitting "send" or "post"—review your message one last time for clarity and those pesky typographical errors and auto-corrects that can usurp the authority of your message. If you can save it and return a few minutes later with fresh eyes, that's all the better. Better still for critical messages is to have a team member or supervisor review your copy prior to its sending or posting.

Let's finish with a few more words on the benefits of the Internet to assist with your own professional and personal growth. It is not possible or necessary for you to be an expert on every problem that may presented to you, but with a few well-chosen search terms, you can find online information on just about any topic imaginable. A few minutes of invested research can save hours of attempted-and-failed remedies later.

And of course, the Internet is a valuable tool for developing your career growth. Say you wanted to start with a customer service job in a company, then advance to a higher position in the public relations office. You could take courses at a local college or online; you may even find some free courses online such as Saylor Academy. Wikipedia offers useful background information and reference links on countless topics. Professional practitioners share their experience and free career tips in blogs and educational forums.

We live in a wonderful age when informative communication can be instantly effective; knowledge is free and widely available for the searching. The technologies are evolving ever higher in productivity while lower in cost. Accessibility is becoming worldwide, to all levels of society. Let's put it to good use

Summary

- E-communication involves messaging through business platforms such as e-mail, corporate websites, social media postings, and other forms of electronic writing.

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- Writing for electronic media may necessarily be brief, yet must clearly and succinctly convey important detail while maintaining a cordial tone.
- By using template copy where possible that has been customized and tested, you can avoid unnecessary work, typos, ambiguities, and misinformation.
- Pause for a little time before sending or posting your messages, and double-check for errors.
- The Internet is a valuable tool for searching out answers to issues you may be working with, as well as developing your own career.

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Customer Service Teamwork

Teamwork Basics

Of all the challenging aspects of the customer service workplace, effective teamwork may be the most trying. If you've have a bad experience with a customer, it's typically over as soon as she or he exits the door or hangs up the phone. Yet bad team relations are there to stay. On the other hand, a smooth-running, well-coordinated team will help ensure your department is productive, and your workday is much more enjoyable.

The teamwork dynamic will likely feel familiar. You have been working with teams your whole life: from your family team members of parents and siblings, to schoolyard game teams, to the societal teams composed of your fellow travelers on the freeway and diners in the restaurant.

Teams may be composed of your subordinates, your colleagues, or your superiors in the workplace structure. Some teams may work under strict definitions of roles and duties; others may be loose assemblies of people joined together until the completion of an assigned task, who then disband to form new team combinations.

Even if you work alone, you still have to coordinate the complex aspects of your own personality and aptitudes. Maybe some projects you do best in the morning, or others you handle better when motivated by deadline pressure. You assign yourself tasks according to the strengths and weaknesses of your own abilities. The dynamic of a well-functioning team are the same.

Whatever the nature of your team—whether it's an effort of just two workers, eight players on a sports team, or thousands of coordinated employees interacting under a complex corporate structure—certain tactics may help you be most productive as a unified team, along with your own part as a team member.

There are three primary components of effective teamwork: the common vision and mission shared among all team members; the complementary skills of each team member; and interpersonal bonds that tie it all together. Let us consider how those components interact.

A common vision requires strong leadership providing a direction for the organization and your team to follow—a guiding principle or a mission statement. Before you can have cohesion as a team, there must be clearly defined duties, interim mileposts, and expected end goals. There's an old saying that where there is no vision, the people perish. This is as true for teams, companies and other organizations, as it is for entire civilizations.

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The best functioning team may be composed of a diverse group of people providing different but complementary skills to the group effort. It may not be immediately clear to each team member what those specific skills and characteristics might be, but you can trust that your experienced supervisors and company managers had their reasons for assembling your particular team. You may quickly notice that each person on your team brings something unique to the group, every member providing assets (as well as detriments) to be utilized and accommodated. Remember the strength of the group does not necessarily come from your similarities, but the combined contribution of each member's differences.

An effective team should bond together in common support of the company's vision and mission. This is an ongoing process, as the team members come to appreciate each another's abilities, loyalties, and commitment to individual and group successes. As with any well-functioning relationship, the team is also able to examine itself and address and resolve issues, without turning inward and self-destructing. For the full benefits of team dynamics, creativity and differing opinions are not only valuable, but also essential. It is the role of a team leader or supervisor to ensure the team effort remains coordinated and productive, and that proper procedures are followed to keep the team efforts on track.

Team builders have long recognized the dynamics of teamwork evolution, including psychologist Bruce Tuckman's through his described processes of forming, storming, and norming. During the forming phase, teams are assembled; they take inventory of their collective skill base, and define the direction the team should take. The storming phase is where territories are staked, conflicting personalities are observed, and differing visions are argued. The norming phase is where the team details are agreed upon, and a group norm is established.

Sometimes you may find yourself with a team member (or members) who don't pull their weight, who take credit for the work or others, or—the very worse of all—work to undermine the efforts of others to draw attention away from their own poor performance. Your supervisors should typically know who is a good team member, and who is not so good. You will likely be assessed by how well you get along with not only the best workers, but also the troublesome ones. If you can show yourself to be a team player who tries to help everyone do better, even those individuals who aren't as strong—you may be recognized for it, and you might even be promoted to a leadership position for your extra efforts. A history of strong team membership could potentially facilitate promotions into management positions, if that's your goal.

If all these team development phases and conflicts are dealt with successfully, and any difficult team members are managed with care, the team then moves into a performing mode, where its mission is carried out for the good of each team member, the team as a whole, and the organization it serves.

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Summary

- Working well to create an effective team may be one of the most challenging aspects at a workplace.
- The three primary components of an effective team are a common vision, complementary team member skills, and bonding that holds the team together.
- A diversity of skills and perspectives among team members helps create a dynamic team.
- A standard process in team development includes forming, storming, and norming.
- If you can work for the best interests of the team, and help to resolve team problems and conflicts, you may be recognized and rewarded for your efforts.

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Customer Service Worker Self-Care

Taking Care of Yourself

For the most part, you can be sure your customer service co-workers are going to be concerned with how well you perform your assigned duties. Apart from professional collegiality, your personal well-being is going to be outside their realm of responsibility—especially since they will be rightfully concerned with their own well-being. Your supervisor and teammates may help you to the extent that ensures you perform your job well; but much of the obligation for your own care and personal development is going to fall on you.

The act of self-care does not mean spoiling and pampering yourself, or indulging yourself in decadent luxuries. In fact, to ensure the best self-care, you may have to be your own harshest taskmaster. This means forcing yourself to do things you might prefer to avoid, motivating yourself to work on personal growth, and sometimes just saying “no” to things that might hinder your self-development.

Self-Care on the Job

Your supervisors will be responsible for your workload management. Proper workload assignments should consider not only what’s good for the worker, but ultimately what’s also best for overall worker productivity and the company as well. You can help by taking steps in your own interest on the job. Moreover, sometimes you may need to assert yourself to help ensure you get what is needed to ensure your peak productivity.

As covered earlier, one of the first necessary steps when dealing with demanding customer service challenges is to protect yourself with the proper mindset and attitude. Remember, just because a customer or coworker may be agitated or angry does not mean you need to absorb it or respond in kind. Negative emotions can have a harmful effect on your body’s immune system, and can increase your chances of getting sick. You can be most effective as a customer service provider by maintaining an objective detachment, but by also remaining focused, alert, understanding, caring, unemotional, and—most of all—patient.

Both you and your supervisor need to ensure you take regular breaks. Studies show that without sufficient rest, worker productivity drops considerably with potentially high costs to the company. One study estimates that because workers don’t get sufficient amounts of rest, it costs the U.S. national economy $63 billion per year in lost productivity. Some workers have been found to increase their productivity substantially with just a 20-minute nap during the workday. Studies demonstrate that working in 90-minute intervals with intervening rest periods maximizes productivity and overcomes worker fatigue. Some companies such as Google, Coca-Cola, and Green Mountain

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provide renewal rooms for their workers to relax, take naps, meditate, and eat healthy snacks. These companies in return benefit from higher levels of worker productivity and job satisfaction.

Self-Care After the Job

Your skillful ability to connect with customers is what makes you an effective and valuable employee. However, it's important to protect yourself from the draining influences of dealing with problems all day long, and to make sure you don't take the issues home with you at the end of your shift. As you transit home when your workday is done, it might help to visualize leaving all your cares along the side of the road or track, tossing them out one-by-one: customer problems, conflicts with coworkers, frustrations, and unresolved issues. You can pick them up again as you head back to work if you wish—they'll be waiting for you.

Once you get home, try to take an hour just for yourself to rest and replenish. Exercise with a walk or a visit to the gym. Read something light. Listen to your favorite music. Get a massage. Take a long bath. Watch your children play. Cuddle up with a pet. Whatever it takes to put your mind at rest, and restore calm.

Also remember to keep your work in context—it's not just about the money you earn, but the enjoyment you get, and the contributions you are able to make to your family and loved ones. Life is certainly about much more than working and paying bills. Try to find other outlets for your talents and creativity. Volunteering for worthy projects can help you find greater personal satisfaction than you might find solely on the job site. Joining with community programs, churches, and service clubs may increase your social networking with others, as well as your sense of giving back to the larger world around you. It's invigorating and empowering to spread your good will and abilities beyond your own personal sphere.

Most important is to remember you can't help others unless you are taking good care of yourself. Proper self-care can help ensure you're the best person you can be—on the job, at home, and in the greater community where you live.

Summary

- Effective workers need to collaborate with their employers to ensure they take the proper steps for time management and productivity.
- Sufficient rest periods every 90 minutes can keep workers at maximum efficiency.
- Workers should beware of allowing negative emotions at the job place to affect their well-being.
- Creating time for relaxation and other activities can help a person rejuvenate and keep a healthy perspective on work and life.

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Careers in Customer Service

Employment Trends

The good news is the demand for skilled customer service representatives is expected to grow at a healthy rate through the first decades of the 21st century, powered by the numbers of products and services that demand customer support. The bad news is the job market will be highly competitive, and you will have to be as good at serving *yourself* with skill development as you are at serving customers to rise through the ranks.

Here are some interesting projections, courtesy of the Bureau of Labor Statistics

Occupational Outlook Handbook:

- Employers hiring customer service workers will typically be expecting at least a high school diploma.
- Some of the characteristics common in successful customer service workers are strong communications abilities, communication technology skills, interpersonal relations, and problem-solving skills, and all require lots of patience.
- Some of the larger employers of customer service workers include administrative and support services (15%), retail trade (11%), credit activities (9%), wholesale trade (8%), and insurance carriers (7%).
- Customer service workers may require special licenses to answer questions about insurance or financial services. Typically, these licenses require passing a written exam, with preparation often provided by the employer.
- The median hourly wage for customer service workers is around $14.64 per hour (as of 2010) in the United States, which works out to be about $30,500 per year for those working full time.

For much more detail on the outlook for customer service workers, including job prospects, necessary qualifications, working conditions, pay, and so forth, visit the BLS Marketing Career Outlook pages dedicated to *customer service representatives*. As you review the *BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook*, you might benefit by researching retail, marketing, social work, and similar fields, drawing upon your abilities in communications, sales, training, technical support, and related interests.

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As you advance in a customer service position, you might be looking to grow into other related professions. Please spend 1.5 hours touring the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* for career information in the following occupation groups and subcategories:

BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook: http://www.bls.gov/ooh/

Retail

- Sales Agents
- Cashiers
- Information Clerks

Management

- Advertising, Promotions, and Marketing
- Public Relations Specialists
- Sales Managers
- Training and Development

Community & Social Service

- Health Educators
- Social and Human Service Assistants
- Social Workers

21st Century Job Skills

While it is difficult to predict with certainty the rapid technological innovations for decades to come, we can be sure the workplace and requisite skills will be in constant flux. Yet, there are fundamental abilities that are certain to be essential now and in the future. These skills include the abilities to thrive in a global workplace, communicate across multiple cultures, manage diverse international teams, and employ communication technologies to coordinate networked teams in decentralized settings.

Google's "Project Oxygen" conducted extensive data-mining on the company's best international managers and identified eight characteristics of its most effective leaders. These are traits you might work to develop in yourself, if you hope to rise into top positions within your own field and organizations:

1. Be a good coach, providing supportive suggestions to your workers, along with any criticisms.
2. Empower your team, rather than micromanaging and usurping team members' individual initiative.
3. Express interest in your workers' well-being, and get to know them as people and families apart from the workplace.
4. Be results-oriented, motivating your team toward success

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with a focus on removing obstacles to productivity.
5. Be a good communicator and listener, and be responsive to the team's concerns.
6. Help your workers with career development, using the same tools that have helped your own career to advance.
7. Have a clear vision, and keep the team moving forward toward shared goals.
8. Keep your technical skills sharp, so you can demonstrate rather than just direct.

Wisdom of Successful Leaders

The best lessons on how to achieve success frequently do not come from textbooks but from the mouths of those who are successful in their given field. Not long ago, *The New York Times* conducted interviews with chief executives on the qualities most essential for achieving success, for both workers and leaders. The five most critical X-factors, along with quoted CEO perspectives, are:

1. Passionate curiosity: the best CEOs are not always the smartest but are typically the best learners.
2. Battle-hardened confidence: "Tell me what adversity you faced, what you did about it, what did you learn … the people I hire fall down, dust themselves off, and keep fighting the next day." – Nancy McKinstry, CEO of Wolters Kluwer
3. Team smarts: "More than talent, I most need people who can build a team, manage a team, recruit well, and work with their peers." – Susan Lyne, Chairman, Gilt Groupe
4. A simple mind-set: "Be concise, get to the point, make it simple. Bosses are not impressed with complexity." – Adam Bryant
5. Fearlessness: "I have to have people who aren't afraid of change but have an appetite for it." – Mindy Grossman, CEO of HSN

Summary

- Career opportunities in marketing and related fields should remain solid, but practitioners must be prepared for stiff competition.
- The Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook provides extensive information on careers, using related skills in fields of communications, research, management, entertainment, public outreach and education, etc.
- Among the traits helping managers and teams to succeed are the abilities to be a good coach, empower the team, support workers' well-being, focus on results, communicate and listen well, encourage career development, provide a clear vision, and keep skills sharp.
- The most successful leaders have a passionate curiosity, confidence, team smarts, a simple mind-set, and fearlessness.

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Customer Service Career Development

Employment Resources

There is no shortage of avenues to find and apply for job postings. The challenge is rising above the competition: the flood of applications and resumes from dozens or even hundreds of others who aspire for the same position. This is especially true of job openings posted in local media. Of course, the more specialized and developed the skills you have to offer, then the better chance you have of standing out in the stack.

Another tactic is to sidestep the typical employment process and connect directly with the decision makers who might help you navigate the help-wanted labyrinth, or—given the right set of circumstances—even create a position to match your specialized abilities.

First, you might want to do a scan of the sorts of companies and positions seeking employees with your background and skillset. Here are a few sample employment boards to investigate:

Another tactic is to develop a relationship with a manager, vice president, or other well-placed contact in a desired company or organization. Research everything you can: what is the company's history? Where did your contact go to school, what has he/she written, and what projects has he/she tackled? Send your contact a message expressing interest in his or her works, ask questions about his or her success, and request advice. You are not looking for a job at this point, but you are looking to build a relationship. It is even better if the company has no job openings, because you are not competing against anyone. When an opening comes along, you may have established a relationship with a key contact, and he or she might be more inclined to consider you for a position.

An important item to keep in mind about employers and hiring is they are likely to be as apprehensive about the selection process as you are. They are putting themselves on the line with their hiring decision, especially for a position as out-front as a customer service representative. They are inviting a stranger into their home, and that is just plain scary. It is much easier to hire people than it is to get rid of them. Appreciate their challenges, and try to shine as you attempt to assuage their concerns with reasons why you are the perfect fit (if indeed you are).

Internships

Internships are a valuable career-development tool. They allow you to learn and implement key skills, to demonstrate your abilities in a low-stake position while making useful connections, and to determine if this type of work is a good fit for your career.

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There are many examples of well-known and successful former interns, including Bill Gates and Oprah Winfrey.

Most job boards will allow you to search for *internship* positions, and many company websites will announce internship opportunities. You can also offer yourself as an intern directly to a key contact within an organization. There are some websites, such as InternshipPrograms.com, that specialize in connecting applicants with internship openings. On the website below, spend an hour researching internship opportunities by field (e.g. marketing), employer, and location.

As you arrange your internship position, there are a number of useful tips to consider:

- **Negotiate a good title** for your resume: For example, rather than intern, try customer service program coordinator, technical support developer, etc.
- **Investigate if the field is a good career fit**: Check the company out, while the company is considering you. Is this the work to which you want to dedicate your life?
- **Develop industry and company connections**: The most valuable payoff is the people you meet, the references you gain, and the leads you generate.
- **Be low maintenance, observe, and contribute**: Some managers may be skeptical of taking on interns; interns sometimes create more work than managers believe they're worth. Don't be that intern.
- **Treat it as a real job**: Always give your best; you never know who is watching.
- **Volunteer for a non-profit:** It can be more-interesting work, offer a greater diversity of assignments, and have less pressure to generate revenues.

International Careers

All the above suggestions and resources apply to a career in the global marketplace as well, especially if you can bring multilingual and cross-cultural skills to the table. Beyond the regular abilities required for a position in any field, you may be able to expand your resume offerings in critical ways: do you speak a second or third language? Do you have overseas experience? Do you have an especially suitable background (e.g. language skills plus specialized technical training)? Have you worked with international multicultural customers and employees?

The database below provides contact information for a number of international organizations, as well as links to their *about* and *employment* pages. This resource is especially useful for those who hope to apply their communication and technical skills to government work, social marketing, and development programs. Please spend an hour scanning through the database entries on each organization, its mission, and its geographical range of activity.

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Summary

- There are many employment boards (e.g. Careerbuilder.com, Monster.com, and Indeed.com) that list job openings and allow resume postings; try not to get overwhelmed and discouraged by the process.
- It is possible to find job openings by connecting directly with key managers and decision-makers within a chosen organization.
- Employers are also apprehensive about the hiring process; strive to become a perfect fit for their needs.
- Internships are a useful opportunity to develop your skills, demonstrate your abilities, develop key contacts, and try out a field to see if it fits.
- International careers can be exciting and fulfilling. To appeal to international employers, develop valuable skills such as foreign language proficiency, cross- cultural abilities, on-site country experience, and project management.

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Professional Social Networks

Customer Service Job Networking and Professional Development

The business world can be challenging to break into, highly competitive, and frequently unforgiving. Fortunately, there are many support systems. For instance, many social networks allow users to share tips, search job leads, post and explore case studies, and seek support from colleagues facing common problems.

Successful professionals use these resources to their advantage while also sharing employment leads, tips, and best practices.

Through business networking and social network posting, you may also help employers find and recruit you! Check out the following annotated resources that you might find useful as part of your career development in customer service and related occupations. Please spend some time on each of these websites, consider joining if you haven't already, and put their networking power to work on your behalf.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a free social-networking resource with a primarily business bent. You can connect with other professionals; track your friends and colleagues as they progress in their careers; network for employment opportunities; post a resume in order to help employers to find you; join professional groups in fields such as retailing, technical support, and other customer service fields; or start a group of your own. You are also able to research company listings, follow their postings for company news and job openings, and gain inside insights into a company's activities and developments. If you only join one social network for your career growth, this should well be it.

Facebook

Facebook is more personal in nature, but it also provides many opportunities beyond simply staying in touch with loved ones and posting pictures of your pets. Many companies have Facebook pages that you can *like* and visit to follow their in-house news. You might also develop select circles of friends and colleagues who share employment leads, career tips, training opportunities, and the like.

Twitter

Twitter provides yet another opportunity to follow companies' news by subscribing to their *Twitter* feeds. Pick an employer you might like to work for, and follow its daily updates for better insights into the company's updates and new directions.

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Professional Development

Customer service—like most specialized fields in business and public affairs—requires a high level of social skills. As you network with other jobseekers and colleagues in your networks, you may find some useful tips, and even share some of your own. The following suggestions might help with stressful situations of customer interactions, staff meetings, presentations, and just small talk schmoozing at office parties.

- If you have a difficult time with public speaking or interpersonal interactions, you may want to find a Toastmaster's organization near you for some low-stress and supportive practice.
- When preparing for job interviews and performance evaluations, expect hard questions and draft out your responses in advance—especially for the questions you might not want to answer.
  - Do not be afraid to admit that you do not know the answer to a question; instead, offer to find the answer and get back to the asker as soon as possible.
  - Do not rush when answering any questions. Do not feel obliged to fill the quiet after a tricky question. Just pause, think, and then answer.
  - Always dress appropriately, projecting a cool, clean-cut professional image. Dress up or down as the circumstance dictates.
  - Project enthusiasm for your ideas and goals; that attitude is contagious. Remember that if you are not excited about yourself, then the listener never will be.
  - Be truthful, but also do not feel the need to be hurtful. Do not say someone looks unwell, sick, or tired. This will do nothing to further conversation and will only make the person uncomfortable. Remember silence is an option.

Summary

- There are a number of worthwhile networking resources that help job seekers exchange information and leads.
- Social networks such as *LinkedIn* allow us to post resumes, join online professional groups, and help potential employers find us.
- Customer service success requires a high degree of interpersonal skills such as simple but enthusiastic presentation, advanced preparation of information, and sensitivity to the needs of others.

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