



# Customer Service

Tips for taking the best care of customers

## Proven strategies for satisfying every customer

**W**hen tensions run high and tempers simmer, your customer service skills are put to the test. How can you handle problems with panache and not only calm your customers but also maintain their loyalty?

Take some advice from Dave Kost, vice president of retail for Kost Tire and Muffler, a chain of service centers located throughout New York and Pennsylvania.

"When I'm talking with a customer who has a complaint, I want that customer to leave thinking 'These people are really decent. I want to come back and do business with them again,'" Kost says. "I also want customers to be so pleased that they'll tell others about the great service experience they had with us."

*Here are the steps Kost recommends to satisfy every customer:*

- **Ask the questions needed to solve the problem.** You can't solve a customer's problem effectively until you understand the situation. "If a customer is unhappy about a repair, I'll ask: 'What do you use the vehicle for?'"

Where do you drive? What's the mileage? How long do you plan to keep the vehicle?" says Kost. "Then I can give the best recommendation."

- **Be honest and realistic.** "If the wait is going to be an hour, we tell the customer, 'We don't tell them it's going to take less time,'" Kost says. Sometimes it's a good idea to underpromise and overdeliver. "We may say it's going to take 15 minutes longer, just to be safe. We'd rather have customers be pleasantly surprised because the job took less time than be upset because they have to wait longer."

- **Give customers options.** "If a repair is going to take a while, we offer customers several choices. They're welcome to sit in our waiting area, or we'll offer them a courtesy vehicle or a ride," Kost explains. "The key is to accommodate your customers' needs."

- **Learn from experience.** You get better at serving customers as you gain experience, Kost points out. "I think about what worked in a similar situation and offer the same type of solution." That's an effective way to quickly regain a complaining customer's satisfaction.

- **Treat all customers with the utmost respect.** You can show respect for your customers by giving them a feeling of partnership. At Kost Tire and Muffler, employees don't just say "Here's what you need." They say "Let's look at this together." They show customers exactly what's wrong and tell them exactly what's needed to make it right.

- **Follow up.** "After I resolve a complaint I always follow up with an e-mail or send a card in the mail," Kost says. "I say that I want to make sure the problem has been solved to the customer's complete satisfaction."

"I get a 50% to 60% response rate. Customers will get back in touch and say: 'Thank you so much for following up on that. I really appreciate it. Yes, everything is fine now.' And those customers stay loyal for the long term." □

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# Listening skills that will boost customer service levels

**A**s a customer service professional, your ears are two of your most powerful tools. If you mishear an important bit of information, such as a customer's street address, and the order never arrives, your company could end up losing that customer forever.

On the other hand, if you listen carefully and actively, you'll hear not only what customers say but also the unspoken messages between their words. And your

sharp ears may detect a budding problem that could result in a full-blown disaster if you don't nip it in the bud.

*Use these tips to sharpen your listening skills:*

- **Face your customers.** If you're talking with them in person, always face your customers. Turning your body toward them will help you keep your focus where it belongs: on them.

If you're talking to customers on the phone, avoid turning around in your chair or letting your gaze wander around the room. "Face" the customer by looking at the customer's file or account information on your computer screen.

- **Listen with your whole body.** Don't cross your arms—that tells the customer "I'm uncomfortable, and I'm closing myself off from you." You can listen more effectively by maintaining an open, receptive posture. Lean forward in your chair—even if you're on the phone. Your attentiveness will actually come across to the customer!

- **Tone down distractions.** It's tempting to let your gaze wander while you're talking with a customer. So if papers litter your desk, put them in a folder. Otherwise, you may find yourself glancing over a company memo instead of listening to your customer. If you have music playing

at your desk, turn it off. In fact, you should turn off the noise in your head, too—all the thoughts and worries that take your attention away from customers.

And if you're meeting with a customer face to face, it's always best to retreat to a quiet area where you can give the customer your undivided attention.

- **Pretend you're talking with a good friend.** When you're having a hard time concentrating on what a customer is saying and your mind starts to wander, use this trick: Imagine that the customer is one of your best friends or a dear family member. That instantly helps you become more interested in what the customer is saying. Your attention will pick up, you'll listen more effectively and you'll retain more information about the customer's situation. □

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## Quiz: Test your customer knowledge

**Y**ou're a customer service pro. But do you really understand what makes customers tick? Take this quiz and find out—you may be surprised by what you learn!

1. What percentage of customers who have complaints about products and services actually voice their complaints to your company?

- a. 5%
- b. 10%
- c. 25%
- d. 50%

2. What percentage of online shoppers believe that customer service is an important factor in choosing a Web site to do business on?

- a. 12%
- b. 37%
- c. 58%
- d. 94%

3. Being transferred more than once during a call has the following effect on customers' purchase plans:

- a. No effect on intent to purchase
- b. Increases it by 1%
- c. Reduces it by 6%
- d. Reduces it by 16%

4. How many customers said they'd stop doing business with a company if they received paperwork they didn't understand?

- a. 8 out of 10
- b. 6 out of 10
- c. 2 out of 10
- d. 1 out of 10

### Answers

1. **a.** Believe it or not, only 5% of customers who have complaints ever say anything. The vast majority quietly decide to do business elsewhere. That's bad news, because it means most of your company's lost customers disappear before anyone knows something is wrong.

As a front-line professional, you're in the best position to probe for problems and take steps to restore customer satisfaction. When you have customers on the phone, be sure to ask them how they're feeling about your company's products and services. Ask whether they have any concerns they'd like to share with you. Assure them that you'll do whatever it takes to make them happy. Tell them how important and valuable they are to your company.

2. **d.** You might think that customers doing business online don't care much about customer service; they probably seem more interested in self-service. But nothing could be further from the truth, as one study showed.

So when you get calls from customers who do business on your company's Web site, give them the same stellar service you give to customers who carry out all their business on the phone or through the mail. Also, stay up to date on the ins and outs of your company's Web site so you can answer any questions customers might have, such as how to navigate the site, how to order or how

to find information online.

3. **d.** Customers responding to one study said that they don't mind being transferred once during a customer service call. However, their loyalty decreased by 16% when they were transferred more than once.

Make sure you never have to transfer a customer more than once during a call. Have all the information you need to answer customers' questions right at your fingertips. Read all the memos and e-mails you receive that contain updates on the products, services and procedures your customers need to know about.

4. **b.** Unclear, complicated and poorly presented bills, contracts, statements and other documents are a real customer turn-off. In fact, 60% of customers said they'd stop using a company's products or services if they received confusing paperwork from the company.

Make sure everything you send customers is neat, accurate and complete. Double-check spelling, grammar and math to weed out errors. Then ask yourself "How would I feel if I received this document in the mail? Would I think this company cares about me as a customer? Would I feel that this company cares about accuracy? Would I believe that this company cares about quality?" If you answer "Yes" to those questions, your paperwork is probably in top shape. □