

EXCEPTIONAL CUSTOMER SERVICE

To view customer service simply as a process of responding to questions and handling complaints is to miss out on a critical opportunity to maximize your competitive advantage. The ultimate goal of developing steady, repeat business can only be accomplished by creating a consistently satisfying experience for your customers.

Successful companies understand that exceptional customer service is an all encompassing, organizational endeavor. It requires a culture that consistently and honestly reinforces the idea that every department is a customer service department.

Anticipation

Exceptional customer service anticipates and satisfies customer needs before they are fully understood or expressed by the customer. This requires more than an understanding of the business that you're in; it also requires an understanding of each customer's unique situation and the needs that arise from it. The value that you provide to your customers increases exponentially when you're able to help them navigate and avoid problems that haven't yet come to mind. Be focused on problem solving rather than selling.

Expectation

By definition, customer dissatisfaction occurs when customers' expectations aren't met. Failing to deliver on what was promised is one thing. Failing to communicate what you'll deliver is quite another.

All dealings with customers should clarify and define exactly what they can expect to receive. You're the expert in what you have to offer, not the customer. Make it your responsibility to ensure that their expectations are in line with what you plan to deliver.

Flexibility

While standard operating procedures are necessary for maintaining consistency, don't allow a rigid structure to hinder customer dealings. Every customer has individualized

needs. Give your employees some autonomy in tailoring their service to satisfy those needs.

Avoid overuse of template-based solutions, and appoint an interventionist with the skills and authority to break customers with unique problems out of the feedback loop of unsatisfactory results.

Honesty

Nothing sinks an organization's credibility faster than dishonest dealings with customers, particularly those that receive official or unofficial management sanction.

Never make promises that you aren't sure you can keep; admit and resolve mistakes quickly and fairly; and employ zero tolerance for employees who are dishonest, regardless of title or position.

Responsiveness

Not all problems or inquiries can be resolved immediately, but your customers need to know that 1) they are being heard, 2) that you are concerned, and 3) that you are working on the solution

Nothing frustrates and angers a customer more than feeling ignored. Always respond within 24 hours or less to customers who have gotten in touch with you. If you have no information to report, tell them when you will have information to report. If you can't tell them when, inform them that you've received their communication and are working on a timeline.

Bottom line: Report something, even if there's nothing to report. Silence signals failure and lack of concern.

Everyone Sells the Same

No matter what business you're in, you're ultimately selling customer satisfaction. In every interaction — before, during, and after the sale, or even if there's no sale — you shape the perception of both your company and your product. Customers buy experiences. Make theirs as good as they can be.

