

Customer Service

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Keep them Smiling: 5 Steps to Improve Your Customer Service

For companies with corporate clients, sometimes referred to as business-to-business or “B2B” enterprises, one of the best ways to separate yourself from your competition is by having great customer service. Just as human beings like to be paid attention to and treated well, your corporate clients are no different – they are largely comprised of people after all! So how can you turn your customer service into a winning feature of your company? Here are five tips:

1. Know your customer

The more you know about your customer – their business objectives, challenges, organizational setup, processes – the better you will be able to serve them. Finding out what you can about the customer need not be a lengthy exercise, and you may only need to do it once every year. Go on to the internet; you will often find a great deal of publically-available information. Talk to your service representatives, or to other people and businesses that interact with your customer to find out what they know. Take a look at your competition. The way they interact with your customer may reveal things about that customer that you did not know. Then based on what you have discovered, think about how you can improve the service you provide to your customer and what actions you must take to implement your new plan.

2. Listen to your customer

The old cliché ‘the customer is always right’ may not be true 100% of the time. However, listening to what your customer has to say will tell you about their priorities, and thus enable you to satisfy their needs. Therefore, make it easy for your customers to provide feedback of all sorts. Take positive feedback as a sign of things you should continue doing (or increase, if possible). But, more importantly, take negative feedback as an opportunity to make a visible change that is likely to impress the customer. Simple avenues to received feedback include a short “pulse check” survey delivered once a quarter by email or online to your key client partners. Three simple questions you should ask are:

- What are we doing well?
- What could we be doing better?
- What should we start doing or stop doing?

In many cases customers will be eager to provide more information – they just need to be asked.

3. Stay on top of customer complaints

A great way to demonstrate value to the customer is to show that you care about the issues that bother, frustrate, or irritate them and that you working to address these issues as quickly as possible. Specifically:

- **Make sure you are aware of the complaints.** Talk to your operations and customer service representatives to find out what problems each customer has. Make a prioritized list in order to address them. Avoid being surprised by issues, as this limits your ability to manage their consequences
- **Communicate with your customer.** Often times the worst thing about a problem is that the service provider pretends it does not exist. For example, when traveling by air, too many of us know the frustration of waiting in an uncomfortable departure hall with no idea why the flight is delayed and when it will leave. A simple email indicating that you are aware of an issue (and the inconvenience it is causing) and that you are working to resolve it not only prevents angry phone calls, but also helps your client make alternative arrangements if need be. Even better if you can provide a time estimate of when the issue will be resolved. But be realistic, otherwise you risk disappointing them further.
- **Follow up with the customer.** At a minimum send another message to know that an issue has been resolved. This will help them revert back to normal operations, or it can identify if a problem still exists – meaning there is another issue. If possible go a step further and find out if they are satisfied with the resolution – or better yet, what you could have done better

4. Examine each and every customer touch-point

If you've ever had the pleasure of staying in a top-class luxury hotel, then you may be familiar with the feeling of having everything being thought of and planned for – right down to the smallest detail. The same principle can be applied to your customer service. A customer who believes you are doing everything you can to ensure they are happy and satisfied is a customer who is likely to stay. Examine all the ways you or your employees interact with the customer. Each is an opportunity to stand out, thus reaffirm their commitment to you. Conversely a single bad experience may be enough to ruin your reputation in the eyes of your customer. Prioritize the key touch-points – in person, via phone, email and so on. Review each one to make sure the right things are being done or find out what needs to be done to make each experience better. Are you polite, pleasant, respectful, and attentive? Do you communicate promptly, clearly and concisely via email? Are you always available (as advertised) to take phone calls? Make sure that for each touch-point the right behaviors and skills are being demonstrated – and done consistently.

5. Make sure you have the right team

Providing superior customer service clearly takes some effort and requires a number of different skills: attention to detail, follow-through, hospitality, patience, empathy and understanding, and the ability to receive criticism. If your team is not properly equipped or motivated to deal with your customers, your efforts are likely to fall short. Make sure your team is undistracted, motivated and well equipped by:

- What are we doing well?
- Talking to your customers about your client service representatives to find out if they are carrying their responsibilities as expected
- Reviewing these performance evaluations to identify opportunities for improvement
- Talking to your client service team to find out if this is the job they want to be doing, or if there is something else within the company to which they are better suited or simply more interested in
- Identifying skill gaps and organizing training to address the gaps (or perhaps encouraging employees to go out and obtain the necessary training, and offering to reimburse all or some of the cost)

Each of the above recommendations is not particularly innovative or complex. The challenge, more often than not, lies in carrying out these steps consistently and reliably. If you are able to do so, you will see dividends in the form of a customer service team, system, and strategy that provides a significant competitive advantage and satisfied clients.

Thank you for reading!



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Investment Manager at Adenia Partners since 2012, Nnennia has eight years' experience as a private equity investment professional and business strategist. She developed her deal skills at Sverica International, a lower middle-market buyout firm based in San Francisco. Nnennia also worked for the International Finance Corporation based in Lagos, Nigeria. She began her career as a management consultant at the Monitor Group (Boston). She earned her Bachelor's degree in chemical engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and an MBA from Harvard Business School.

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