

Moving Your Call Center's Customer Service from Good to Excellent

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Eight essential customer service skills that will result in customers for life

By: George Krnich

In today's competitive business world, providing excellent customer service is more important than ever. Customer service is an integral part of any call center and should not be viewed as merely an extension of it. According to the Customer Service Training Center, about 70% of people who take their business elsewhere do so because of poor customer service and lack of human interaction.



In our industry, we must remember that we have three sets of customers – the independent agents, who sign up and service the dealership; the dealership employees (including F&I personnel, service department workers and office staff); and the contract holder, who ultimately purchases our products. As a result, our business would not exist without all of these customers, so we must keep them happy and satisfied. If you have customers, you have to have excellent customer service. Everybody talks about the importance of good customer service, but today that is no longer enough. It has to be superior and unexpected service that tells your customers you appreciate their business.

When customers call on the phone, we are provided with a tremendous opportunity to reinforce and grow our relationship with them. Attention to customer service will go a long way in helping you satisfy your customers and make them feel as if they are truly special. Excellent customer service will result in happy customers who come back over and over again. Despite the challenges of the economy, many businesses have maintained their customer base through their outstanding customer service. Utilizing effective communication skills can help businesses to better understand client expectations. Customers who are pleased with a company will be more likely to stay with them and recommend the business to others.

Customer loyalty is achieved when the customer's concerns are consistently resolved in a way that exceeds their expectations. At American Auto Guardian "AAGI," we call this the "WOW Factor." The WOW Factor is defined as treating every customer in such a memorable way that when the transaction is complete, the customer tells someone else how great the experience was. This is achieved by giving every customer more than they expected and doing it in a polite, professional and cheerful manner. Customers are people and need to be treated as individuals. Catering to their unique needs, concerns and expectations will make them life-long customers. Excellent customer service skills and the WOW

factor are essential to truly win over the customers. You can't deliver extraordinary service without extraordinary customer service skills and the commitment to do so consistently.

There are eight essential customer service skills needed for delivering superior customer service:

1. *Greeting*

- According to customer service trainer Kate Tammemagi, you have ten seconds to make a positive first impression over the phone.
- Before you answer the phone, take a deep breath. Most of us can be referred to as "shallow breathers"- we take small breaths in and out and therefore sound tired when we answer the phone. The goal is to sound alert and project that you are glad that the customer called.
- Be sure to greet callers enthusiastically, professionally and with a smile on your face – smiling is the most important part of customer service. When you are smiling you are telling the rest of your body that you are happy. This is reflected in the tone of your voice.
- Positive posture – sit up straight in your chair and lean slightly forward – this will give you a richer tone and will help you feel more confident. Slouching will deaden your voice tone.
- Obtain the customer's name. Use it early and often in the conversation to build rapport. Psychologists have concluded that subconsciously, the most pleasing word in any language is one's own name.
- Make sure to speak slowly and clearly while using a pleasant, congenial and friendly tone. This will place the caller in a more relaxed state of mind and will not add to any anxiety or frustration that the customer may be calling about.
- Never answer the phone with food in your mouth or while chewing gum.
- Place the caller first – never answer the phone unless you are able to give the customer your full and undivided attention.

2. *Active Listening*

- Depending on the study being quoted, we remember a dismal 25 – 50% of what we hear. To become a better listener, you must practice active listening skills.
- Active listening is vital to excellent customer service. Active (or attentive) listening means that you are not only hearing but also comprehend what the customer is saying.
- Listen for key facts, key feelings. Pay attention to the customer's pace and tone of voice.
- Don't interrupt the caller – it frustrates the caller and limits your full understanding of their message. Take notes, if necessary, about questions or concerns that arise while the customer is speaking.
- Encourage the caller to continue with small verbal comments like "yes" and "uh huh". This will demonstrate that you are listening and conveys your attention to the speaker.
- When the caller is finished, ask clarifying questions to identify the customer's needs. Often tilling the information provided by the customer will reveal clues on how to best resolve the issue.

- Reflect what has been said by paraphrasing and summarizing the customer's comments. This will ensure that you know exactly what the problem is. Understanding the customer's concerns is the first step toward resolution.

3. *Communication Skills*

- Pacing, or mirroring the customer's words, sense of urgency and need for detail. Research shows that pacing or mirroring helps build rapport and trust with the caller. This is a simple and powerful way to make a personal and emotional connection with the customer.
- Pitch/tone of voice – Shallow breaths cause hypertension which produces a thinner tone in your voice. This thinner tone creates a lower volume that subconsciously generates an unpleasant feeling for the caller. However, deep breaths produce a deeper, stronger tone to your voice which is a more relaxed and pleasant sound to the customer.
- Volume – You must speak loudly and clearly to indicate confidence and your commitment to the customer.
- Enthusiasm and inflection are a must. A dull and monotone voice will leave customers feeling dull and dreary about your organization. Enthusiasm cannot be faked or coached – either you have this quality or you don't.
- Another essential skill is the ability to leave stressful situations behind. The customer that just yelled and screamed in the previous call has nothing to do with the next caller waiting to be taken care of. To be able to provide excellent customer service, you need to place the emotions of a stressful interaction away and realize that each new customer presents a new issue.
- Vocally, soften the beginning of a question and let your voice's tone go up at the end of the question. This technique will present the question in a non-threatening and energetic manner.
- Communicate in a positive, friendly and courteous manner. Always treat your customer with dignity and respect; phrases such as "please" and "thank you" convey these feelings to your customer.
- Avoid using technical or industry jargon when speaking to a contract holder. Yielding information with clarity enhances customer participation and knowledge while eliminating problems that are compounded by confusion or frustration.

4. *Diffuse Anger*

- Always give an upset or angry customer time to vent their emotions. Allow customers time to present their entire case before speaking, listen to what the customer is saying to determine the real issue.
- Never get drawn into an argument with an upset customer. If you try to make a point of proving that a customer is wrong and you're right, the situation will only escalate.
- Never take their comments personally. The customer is upset or frustrated with the situation, not the call center employee.
- Maintain a calm, slow and steady demeanor to help calm an angry customer and allow your call to continue smoothly.

- Ask probing questions to discover a satisfactory solution that is acceptable to the customer.

5. *Empathy*

- Empathy shows the angry or hostile customer that you understand the problem and the hardship that it has created for them. Most customers just want to be listened to and understood.
- Use comments such as, "I can understand why you would feel that way," or " I realize it's frustrating to experience this. What can we do to resolve this issue?" or "I would feel frustrated and upset too, if that happened to me."
- Make sure that your empathy is sincere or else it will sound condescending or the customer will think that you are patronizing them. People value sincerity as it creates a good feeling and trust between you and the customer.

6. *Team Building*

- Always tell your customer what you CAN do for them. Don't begin your conversation by telling them what you CAN'T do.
- Use positive and definite language instead of negative language. Negative language contains words such as not, never, can't, won't, shouldn't, etc. Always switch what you are saying so that it will sound positive.
- According to neuroscientist Andrew Newberg, M.D., negative language releases dozens of stress producing hormones in the speaker and the listener. These chemicals increase anxiety and irritability, and they impair one's ability to communicate, reason properly and accept logic.

7. *Ability to Apologize / Recover (when necessary)*

- Make a point of apologizing to the customer when your company is responsible for the customer's predicament. A sincere apology can defuse a tense situation quickly and give the customer a more positive impression of your company.
- Be humble. When you have made a mistake, do not be afraid to own up to it and apologize. Most customers realize that you are only human and like them, are capable of an error.
- A genuine apology is another excellent team building strategy. It shows the customer that you are not pretentious and are willing to admit your error. The worse thing to do is to try to cover up an error. The truth will always come out and you make the company look ten times worse in the end.
- Recovery is the act of going "above and beyond" to make amends for the error. While the apology is important, it is the recovery that counts! "It always costs less to fix the problem than it does NOT to fix the problem."
- Recovery is always about adding something unexpected for the customer that exceeds their expectations.

8. Resolution

- Just as the first ten seconds of the conversation make a lasting impression on your caller, the final 30 seconds will be when the customer finalizes their opinion of your company.
- Match up the best solution to the customer's individual problem or issue. Active listening will help guide you to the best possible resolution for the customer. Understanding which solutions work best for the customer will give them the feeling that your company is competent and efficient.
- Always thank the customer for calling, review the problem and most importantly, your proposed solution with agreement from the customer. Confirming the satisfaction accomplishes a smooth, subtle shift in ownership of the issue.
- Confirming resolution also demonstrates three important things:
 1. That you care about getting it right.
 2. That you're willing to keep going until you get it right.
 3. That the customer is the one who determines what "right" is.
- Ensure that the customer understands what will happen next, as well as the time frame.
- Finish with a nice positive close that will make sure that the customer is happy and satisfied, which is always the goal of customer service.

By practicing and honing these eight essential customer service skills your call center can begin the transformation from good to excellent. People don't sit around talking about the quality of customer service at their favorite or least favorite businesses, but it will come up at some point and it sticks in your customer's mind. Giving your customer an unforgettable positive experience should be your top priority so they share with family and friends what they experienced dealing with your company. You must be constantly thinking of ways to elevate your company by giving your customers something unexpected that they cannot get elsewhere.

Remember, we sell our customers a piece of paper with words written on it. It is our actions, words, promises and commitment that make that piece of paper valuable! Live up to your promises, treat every customer with respect, and always maintain a cheerful, positive manner with everyone. Do these things consistently and it the result will likely be customers for life!

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