

**Certificate in  
Executive Office Skills**

**Unit One  
Customer Services**

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## **CUSTOMER SERVICE**

### **OBJECTIVES**

*After studying this unit you will have a good understanding of your customers' needs and will be able to put good customer care into practice in everyday situations which will benefit your organisation.*

Every business, large or small, needs to provide good customer service because without it, customers will not return and dissatisfied customers will put others off, and as a result, profits will fall. Ultimately the entire business could fail due to lack of good customer care! However, good customer service is a skill which can be easily learnt.

Working in an office may mean that you have less direct customer contact than someone working in, say, a shop or a hairdressers, but everyone with whom you deal (both internally and externally) in your working life at the office is a customer or potential 'customer' of sorts.

For instance, when you have to co-ordinate a meeting of sales managers, you will need to provide a good customer service to these managers. After all, in the context of you providing the service (i.e. the organisation of the sales meeting itself) they are indeed 'customers' who need to be given what they want (i.e. an appropriate venue, refreshments, their agendas etc.).

Customer service, therefore, is an essential skill and within its remit there are several types of 'contact' that you may have with your organisation's clients, whatever type of business you are in.

## CUSTOMER CONTACT

This may include:

- 1 Face-to-face contact
- 2 Dealing with awkward customers
- 3 Dealing with complaints
- 4 Dangerous contact
- 5 Person-to-person contact

### **Exercise 1.1**

Consider your role in the organisation you work for. Who are your customers?  
Make a summary of them in the space below.

## **FACE-TO-FACE CONTACT**

This may occur, for instance, on Reception or when visitors call. Face-to-face contact is arguably the most important contact you will have with a customer for even if you normally deal with your internal and external 'customers' on the telephone day by day, when you meet your customers face to face you immediately become 'real' to them and they to you. You need to make a positive first impression not only for your own sake, but also for the organisation whose image you will be projecting.

Face-to-face contact with the customer means that you cannot do things you may normally be tempted to do over the telephone. For example, have you ever cut someone off 'accidentally' when the conversation became too difficult or heated? Or put someone on hold in desperation when you could not find their documents and then perhaps had to ring them back later?

'Face to face' with your customer (or even your boss, or work colleagues) can sometimes translate into 'on the spot' because you will have to think on your feet for appropriate greetings, responses and answers to queries. You must also be more aware of your projected image, and body language.

To project the required, positive image, you should:

- (a) **SMILE.** It will put the visitor/customer in a good mood, and it will make you feel good, too. No-one wants to be met or greeted with a frown. It's simply not welcoming.
  
- (b) **MAKE EYE CONTACT.** Not an aggressive or intrusive stare - just enough to make the customer feel important, yet comfortable. It helps establish a rapport and can help you judge customer reaction and assess their needs during a transaction.

(c) CHOOSE YOUR WORDS CAREFULLY

On Reception you will need to follow that smile with a 'Good morning', 'Good afternoon' or whatever is appropriate. Following that with a 'How may I help you?' may be fine if this is a first-time caller, but if it is someone who calls on your company regularly (and particularly if you are expecting them at a certain time), you should try to call the person by their name.

Saying "Good Morning Mr. Brown, please take a seat and I shall let Mr. Smith know that you have arrived for your 10.00am appointment" will not only show knowledge of the caller, but rightly indicate very good customer service.

(d) WATCH THE TONE

Whilst choosing the correct words, consider also how you say them. Often it's not *what* you say, but *how* you say it, that counts. Boredom, irritation, aggression, insolence can all be conveyed by an inappropriate manner or tone of voice.

Anyone who has been asked by a hairdressing junior 'Going anywhere nice tonight?' will know that too often this question is almost an industry standard and quite honestly the junior is not interested in where you may be going at all.

Avoid using standard greetings which may sound tired or insincere; avoid being over-familiar with new clients, and whilst being efficient and enthusiastic, remember too that your customer will always be made to feel important if you simply demonstrate good manners and courtesy - with that smile!

(e) BE ATTENTIVE (LISTEN!)

Show the customer that you are actually listening to them - not just hearing what they have to say. Listening is a skill in its own right and you can reassure the customer that you are actually listening by a) not interrupting, b) smiling and nodding when acknowledging a positive situation, c) if applicable (i.e. if it does

not then appear rude or aggressive) shaking your head or murmuring appropriate 'oh dears' etc. in 'negative agreement'.

Whilst these sort of comments/actions make for positive listening skills in most everyday face-to-face situations, be sure not to engage them in matters of dispute or complaint as your 'positive' or 'negative' response to what the customer may be saying can be misconstrued - or even used against you later when they use your actions or words as evidence that they do indeed have a complaint or problem which you may have inadvertently agreed with!

(f) GET TO THE POINT

Whilst you may have a good rapport with many work colleagues and do indeed pass the time of day when time allows, not all colleagues operate like this and indeed many external customers may prefer not to have time wasted with matters that have no bearing on the business in hand.

(g) BEING PRO-ACTIVE

Instead of personal comments, over-friendly jokes and talking about the weather, show your pro-active customer service skills by settling the customer into Reception, offering tea or coffee, pointing out the ladies or gents washroom and offering a company brochure to peruse. In other words, be helpful!

If this is a new customer, they will be pleased that you are making them welcome. Often they may desire such information but may be reluctant to ask for help in a new or strange environment, particularly if you look busy on Reception.

(h) KEEP IT RELAXED

Don't overload the customer with too many instructions on arrival however! Let the advice be given in a relaxed manner and, even if you are busy with phones ringing etc., never make the customer feel as if they are just another interruption to your day.

Never be tempted to carry on a conversation with someone else, whether a colleague or another customer, as each customer should have your full attention until their needs are met.

Politely greet another visitor and then state that you will attend to them in just a moment - ensuring that the present customer is made to feel important. When you are free to speak to the other person, apologise briefly for the delay (which they will have seen for themselves was unavoidable) and then give them the same individual attention afforded to the first customer. That way, all can see that they are fairly and equally treated.

There may be times when a visitor does take precedence according to your own company's protocol (e.g. the Chairman suddenly arrives and wants to see the MD immediately). Deal with this matter as policy dictates, but never be discourteous with any customer in this situation, as the Chairman is sure to notice, anyway!

**Exercise 1.2**

An established customer arrives unexpectedly. How do you greet them? How do you find out why they have 'dropped in'?

## **DEALING WITH 'AWKWARD' CUSTOMERS**

'Awkward' customers should be welcomed as far as possible, as they provide a measure of how good your customer service skills can be! Look at each customer as an important part of the cycle of your business - awkward or not - and awkward ones should become as easy to deal with as others.

### **What makes a customer 'awkward'?**

There may be many factors, each one manifesting itself in a strained initial or ongoing relationship with the company, but by eliminating the possible contributory factors, or counteracting them with good customer service, hopefully the problem will resolve itself. A question we might regularly ask is "Is this customer really being 'awkward'?" or could it be down to another reason?

### **Fear**

Fear (possibly instilled through ignorance of procedures, or not wishing to make oneself appear foolish on new territory) may make the customer appear either abrupt or timid when they contact you. They may appear confrontational or aggressive, 'demanding' their rights instead of making just a simple enquiry.

### **Action**

Defuse the situation with a smile and patience. Actively listen to the customer and instead of taking on board any rude comments made, decide what the real problem may be. E.g. 'I have an appointment with Mr. Jones at 10.00am and now it's already 10.15am - what's going on?'

### **Allay any fears**

The customer may be fearful that Mr. Jones does not wish to see him, that he is being deliberately kept waiting and may not be seen at all. The customer may also have another appointment at 11.30am elsewhere, and is now fearful that he will be

running late and may not be seen at his next port of call either.

You should calmly explain that Mr. Jones is running late, and apologise for the inconvenience. Reassure the customer that they will be seen in a few moments (but check that this is indeed the case, as you will end up having to deal with an even more distressed customer if they think you are now lying as well!)

Perhaps offer a coffee, and give the customer an estimated time of how long their own meeting with Mr. Jones will take (if known), so that they can ring ahead and forewarn the next call that they will be running late, if the need arises. Offer them the use of your telephone to do so, if required.

## **Disability**

Some of your customers may indeed suffer from either a minor or major physical disability which may make both customer and service provider *feel* awkward. A partial deafness, for instance, may not be an obvious disability, but it can make conversation awkward for both parties if not dealt with efficiently and professionally.

## **Action**

Be sensitive, attentive, courteous and above all use common sense. If greeting a caller with hearing difficulties, speak up if need be, but do not shout or patronise the customer. If your customer is someone who is less able, get up to open the door for them if they have difficulty negotiating the entrance. This is no more than a common courtesy you would show to an able-bodied colleague who has both arms full of books, for example, so why feel awkward in extending the courtesy to someone who has just one arm? If this can be done swiftly, politely and without fuss, the customer will be made to feel welcome, but without being made to feel awkward as well.

Check whether your company has any special equipment or facilities to help those with disabilities to access your services more easily. Telephone loops, wheelchair ramps, adapted toilet facilities etc. should be available to make life easier in general,

and in providing these facilities you will automatically help eliminate some of the 'awkwardness' that might otherwise arise on occasion.

### **How should you deal with an impatient customer?**

Simple. Be courteous. Give an apology or explanation for any delays. Provided you are doing - and are seen to be doing - all that you can to solve their situation, you can really do no more.

#### **Exercise 1.3**

Imagine you are the personal assistant to Hr. Happy, the Sales Manager. Mr. Angry storms through the door of your office and demands to see Mr. Happy immediately. Mr. Angry insists that he has an appointment, but has been kept waiting in Reception for over half an hour. You know that Mr. Happy is out of the office all day at a meeting.

What do you say and do to alleviate the situation?

## **WHERE ARE YOU?**

Customer relations need to be nurtured. If someone rings for advice and you do not answer the phone, you will have an unhappy customer on your hands. If you are the only person available to answer your telephone at work, do have a specially recorded message left on your phone to clearly state:

- Who you are (i.e. which telephone/office the caller has reached)
- Why you cannot take the call
- When you will next be available
- What else the caller can do meantime

### **For Example:**

“Hello, this is Mary Smith (Mr. Peter's assistant) at Gordon & Gordon Solicitors. Unfortunately I'm away from the office until Tuesday 3rd March, but if you wish to leave a message I will gladly call you when I return. If you need further assistance now, please redial our main switchboard on 123 45678 and our Reception will be pleased to help. Thank you for calling.”

## **IT'S NOT MY PHONE**

If someone else's phone rings in your office and they are away from their desk - do not ignore it. You cannot say 'it's not my phone' - because it is! Someone is ringing your company and as a representative of the company it befalls you to ensure good customer service to the caller. It may be a call from a colleague, another internal branch or a potential new customer. They may not have asked to speak to you personally, but they deserve a personal response from you on behalf of your absent colleague wherever possible.

It may not always be possible to do so, for instance in a busy call centre or similar, but you should always try to pick up your colleague's unanswered phone within a certain number of rings, and with an appropriate greeting such as "This is Gillian answering Mary Jones's telephone. I'm sorry that Mary's away from her desk at present but would you like me to take a message for her?"

The caller will be delighted that someone has taken personal responsibility for passing a message onto the appropriate person - too often in the name of customer service people are left to the mercy of endless voicemail messages and telephone instructions urging them to 'Dial 0 for Reception, or press #03 for Sales', or to waste 5 more minutes listening to the next five options.

**Exercise 1.4**

Answerphone messages can be very irritating and actively discourage the caller from leaving a message; they are often unclear or glib. Devise a (new) message for your answerphone which is clear and informative.

## DEALING WITH COMPLAINTS

Hey, don't take it personally! In your normal working life there will be times when you may make a mistake, or when someone else, somewhere within the company, has made a mistake, or there has been a problem encountered by the customer.

If the customer feels aggrieved, with or without good reason, they will complain. It may or may not have been your fault to start with. Either way, accept the complaint for what it is - a request for better service - not for what it may appear to be, i.e. a personal attack on your competence or a slight on the company's goods or services.

No-one wishes to receive complaints all of the time, if that were the case, there should be a serious look at goods and/or staff practices by management. However, occasional complaints should be viewed as an opportunity to provide even better customer service, not as a spanner in the works!

Legitimate complaints give us an opportunity to put right something which may otherwise have been neglected for a period of time, potentially losing more customers than we should ever realise, and inadvertently doing a lot of harm to the company image.

A matter resolved well also gives the customer an opportunity to sing our praises to others ("They dealt really well with my complaint at the Head Office; It is a really understanding/helpful/professional organisation") - and by dealing admirably and appropriately with any complaints, we would find ourselves establishing a brand of customer loyalty that might otherwise take years to establish if all things were constantly all right.

To handle complaints effectively, we all need:

- A complaints policy
- Organisational structure

- Handling procedures policy
- Trained and efficient customer services staff

If you do not have procedures in place to support an effective 'complaint solving' system (in other words, Customer Service, again) - whether by a specified department, or by just one designated individual, or by each member of staff taking a personal responsibility for the complaints they actually receive - then the complaint is likely to be overlooked, ignored, or badly handled. This isn't the way to win the customer back and will almost certainly make the situation worse.

**Exercise 1.5**

How are complaints dealt with in your organisation? Does this work well?  
Or could improvements be made?