



The most important customer of the day

I was attending a workshop titled “Sales, Service and Survival in the Catering Industry.”

The keynote speaker, a catering titan, roared from the podium, “If you ever, and I mean *ever*, make a customer feel like they are interrupting your day, I guarantee that within three years, probably sooner, you will be out of business.”

He continued, “To realize success in this industry, and I’m not talking about paying your bills and getting by, I’m talking about creating a very comfortable lifestyle, you must make every customer feel they are your most important customer of

the day. It is your job to make them feel special.” He went on to cite some industry statistics.

- Customers are willing to pay more in exchange for better service.
- 75 percent of customers who switch to a competitor do so because of poor service.
- 95 percent of unhappy customers will do business with you again if you resolve their issue immediately.

Perhaps most eye opening:

- Only 10 percent of customers will tell you about a problem or issue they are having with your company. The most common form of expression is to stop doing business with you.



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“If you have thorough job descriptions and a rigorous training program, exceptional customer service skills are very teachable.”

I had an epiphany that day. I (and my staff) would no longer operate under the assumption, “We haven’t heard anything to the contrary, so everything must be going well.” I began scheduling “check-in” meetings and phone calls with our customers and corporate clients. Without them, our business does not exist.

10 commandments of customer service

Lead by example.

You need to set the bar. Employees will take their cues from the people they work for. Never complain or speak poorly about a customer in front of your staff because it gives them a license to do the same.

Answer the phone & emails.

When the phone rings, answer it—always. Whether it’s before you open, after you close, or on a holiday, answer that phone. The call is often a gateway to business for your company. If a potential customer calls at 10:00 p.m.



See Michael Rosman at CSES2016



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asking for a proposal, politely explain that you are closed for the day and someone will get back to them in the morning. This might prevent them from contacting a competitor. (P.S. Make sure someone follows-up in the morning.)

Try to return all emails, especially those requesting information the same day. Establish a 24-hour maximum policy to respond to all others.

Don't make promises you can't keep.

If you say, "I'll email a proposal by 4:00 p.m. tomorrow"—do it. If you need more time (which happens), let your customer know, before 4:00 p.m.

Suggestion: "Hi, Sara, we're putting together a very thorough proposal for you and it's taking longer than we anticipated. Would it be OK if we send it by 10:00 a.m. tomorrow?"

Listen actively.

Active listening is the art of rephrasing the key point(s) of what your customer has said, but in the form of a question.

For example: "If I'm understanding correctly, you're on a very tight schedule and most importantly, all five lunches need to be set-up in each conference room absolutely no later than 12:30. Is that correct?"

Fix the problem first.

Regardless of where the problem occurred or who was involved your immediate focus should be resolution.

Suggestion: "Sara, first thing, let's get you 20 more box lunches as quickly as possible. I'll call you later and we can figure out what happened to cause this miscommunication."

Acknowledge mistakes.

Most people respect those who admit mistakes with no excuses attached.

Suggestion: "I apologize that we came up short today and I understand why you are frustrated. I assure you we will take the necessary steps to ensure this never happens again."

Go the extra mile.

Going above and beyond the call of duty means doing something that is not required as part of your professional obligation. It is doing something special or extra. Customers, even difficult ones, often show extreme loyalty when you demonstrate they are important enough to go beyond what is required. They may not always express it, but it usually makes a big impact.

Have a professional staff.

If you have thorough job descriptions and a rigorous training program, exceptional customer service skills are very teachable. Your entire staff should be empowered to actively address problems a customer might encounter.

Promote familiarity.

Your delivery staff is often the face of your corporate drop-off business. Have the same employees deliver to the same

companies as much as possible. This is a great way to build rapport and business relationships.

Remember names.

Customers tend to like you more, and assume you are more competent if you use their name a few times during conversations. It makes them feel that you are listening and that you genuinely care.

When things go wrong

When you are on the phone with an upset customer, wait until your customer is finished speaking before you respond. Do not interrupt. Do not try to defend your position. (There may be a time to do so, but now is not it.)

Try this:

Apologize: "I am sorry this happened." (Yes, even if it is not your fault.)
"Thank you for bringing it to my attention."

Repeat the issue: "I understand you are regularly running out of napkins during the lunches we are catering for your clients."

Validate: "I appreciate how frustrating this must be for you."

Suggest resolution: "What if we were to drop off a case of back-up napkins for you to keep in a storage closet? If you run short again, you will have more right there."

Act quickly: Deliver the napkins within 24 hours.

When the dust settles

Follow up with the customer, preferably by phone. Depending on the circumstances, consider visiting them in person. (Armed with a peace-offering of desserts or cheese and crackers doesn't hurt.)