

The 10 Pitfalls of Customer Service and how to avoid them

By Bob 'Idea Man' Hooey

All too often our customers look to us for guidance, and don't get what they expect. Instead they get excuses or put off's, when we should be giving them real service.

Think about the following phrases - ever heard them? Ever heard them in your store or business? Here's a few thoughts on how I'd suggest you might better serve your customers.

We don't have that...

Might I suggest that a value-added service-based answer would be to find out what they need and offer to help them find it, or direct them to where it can be found! Service doesn't have boundaries, and it is willing to go beyond the normal needs to help solve customers' problems.

All sales are FINAL!

This can all too often be a shortsighted policy, if we are really service oriented and want the best for our customers. Many progressive companies have developed a liberal return and refund policy. Employees are empowered to assist clients as needed.

I don't know who does that?

If we are genuinely service focused we get the opportunity to act as a resource in finding what they need. Often a few calls or just being aware of what other people offer can be an immense service to clients. And who do you think they remember down the road? Becoming a resource increases your on-going value to potential clients and employers.

That's not my department!

Be willing to help out - even when it isn't your department. Foster a sense of teamwork by taking leadership in making sure all your firm's customers are taken care of, not just the ones in your department.

Being all things to all people - YES!

On the other side of the coin, saying yes can be equally bad in trying to serve your clients. Being realistic about what you can feasibly deliver or have the depth of knowledge to share can be counter-productive. True customer service is in knowing what you can do well and directing clients to other suppliers for areas that fall outside your expertise.

Sorry, that's our policy!

Clients don't want to hear about your policy - they want to hear how you'll help solve their problems. Flexibility in policy is essential if you are seriously committed to customer service.

Tell us what you think...but you don't really mean it.

When you ask your clients for feedback - and that's a great idea - make sure you listen and acknowledge their input! Nothing will kill your credibility quicker than asking and then ignoring their responses. Build-in feedback opportunities and then respond to those who take the time to really tell you how you or your staff is doing. They are giving you valuable information. Take the time to thank them. Ask for their email address or other contact information and respond!

Call us about our special offer...but not everyone knows what it is.

Ever have a sale, or in store special and forget to let everyone on your team know the details? Kind of embarrassing when your own staff is caught unaware of what the public knows or wants. Make sure everyone is on the same page when you market a special product, price or service.

It will be ready tomorrow! You hope?

This is a big risk! Make sure you know what you are promising can be delivered on time -every time. In fact, being conservative in your estimation of delivery time and allowing a margin for error and delays.

I don't know?

Not knowing is ok. Unfortunately, too often I hear this used as an excuse to not help your customers. If you don't know make a point of trying to find out and tell your client you'll get back to them with the information.

If you are aware of these pitfalls in customer service and have a game plan to counter the negative impact of using them you're part way there. Good customer service is systematically working to eliminate these pitfalls from your business and your vocabulary. Maximized customer service incorporates the following guiding principles.

Apologize when necessary, but don't debate.

Customers will have problems and sometimes you will make mistakes. Apologize when necessary and make them happy. Don't enter into debate with clients - you never win. Be patient and listen. Then take care of their problem as best you can.

Feedback will keep you focused.

Making good use of feedback from your customers will help keep you focused on making your business work more effectively in serving clients.

Remember to stay adaptable and be flexible.

Business success is a process not perfection. Serving your clients' real needs will keep you flexible in your service, products and procedures. It will build solid relationships too!

Always say yes, or help them find it.

Being in business makes you in part a resource center for your clients. If you aren't able to solve their needs, make sure you know and can direct them to someone who can.

Under promise - always over deliver.

Make this one your bottom line in establishing and building your business. Proving your ability to serve your clients depends on your ability to deliver what you promise. Be clear about what you can deliver and when - and then move heaven and earth to make good on your promise.

Customer service is not just 'a part' of your business. Customer service 'is' your business! With out it - you will have no business.

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