

DARTNELL'S CUSTOMERS FIRST®

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO PROFITABLE CUSTOMER RELATIONS

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

What Would You Do?

Walk The Line Between Aggressive And Timid

You sometimes have to walk a fine line to assert yourself without offending your customers(Page 2)

Know Your Internal Customers

While you spend the bulk of your work day dealing with external customers, your relationships with internal customers will drastically effect your company's bottom line(Page 2)

Avoid Becoming A Horror Story

Customers love to pass on stories about the terrible service they've received. Don't be their horror story!(Page 3)

How Well Do You Know Your Teammates?

Are you and your teammates in the right positions for your personalities, goals and skill sets? Find out!(Page 3)

Keep Your Cool With Offensive Customers

Your company probably has regulations against retaliating to a customer's verbal insults, but you're not completely powerless(Page 4)

Foster Teamwork For Stronger Customer Service

In the world of mathematics, the whole is the sum of it's parts. On your service team, the same holds true(Page 6)

...and more!

Why Your Job Is So Important To Your Organization

Sometimes the frustrations of a hectic day can make you lose sight of why your job is so important — but it is! As a customer service rep your service can make or break a customer's image of your company.

Remember these points when you're feeling overwhelmed.

- * **You're helping people solve their problems.** Whether it's a simple sale or a complex problem, you're helping make real people's lives just a little bit easier.
- * **Bad service means a bad reputation.** People aren't shy about spreading the word about bad customer service experiences. When you do a good job, you preserve good will about your organization.
- * **Customers are your livelihood.** Good customer service experiences generate more business, and more business means better job security.
- * **You're the standard-bearer for your company.** Every time you interact with a customer, you are your organization for that person.
- * **You are a vital professional.** Every customer interaction is an opportunity to learn and grow. ■

QUICK TIPS

- **Simplify the process.** Don't expect your customers to figure out your company's processes through trial and error. Make processes easy so you both have less frustration.
- **Control your reactions.** By keeping your head when helping angry customers, you don't feed their emotion. When you get upset along with them, it only gets them more upset.
- **Don't fake it.** If you don't know the answer to a customer's question, admit you don't know but offer to find the answer. Don't make up an answer to save face: if the customer knows you're bluffing he'll feel insulted.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Walk The Line Between Aggressive And Timid

As a customer service rep, you sometimes have to walk a fine line to assert yourself without offending your customers.

Do you come off as too aggressive? Or do you let customers get away with things they shouldn't? Oftentimes, striking a middle ground between being too assertive and too timid depends on the specific situation.

For instance: A customer makes an offensive remark about your ethnic background. Do you grit your teeth and ignore it, or do you get angry and shout at the customer? Neither, experts say.

The best thing to do in this situation is to set limits with the customer, firmly letting him know that you won't tolerate his rude comments. You can be assertive without being aggressive by saying "I'm willing to help you, but only if you don't make any more comments about my ethnicity."

Scenario: An angry customer threatens to complain to the press about how your agency "ripped him off." Do you do whatever he wants to make him happy and protect your agency's reputation?

No: Tell him that he has the right to do so, then ask if he'd like to speak to one of your superiors about his problem.

Usually when a customer threatens to go to the press, he's merely trying to scare you into giving him what he wants. Show him that his threat doesn't faze you, then let him speak to someone in a position of authority to fulfill his need to be "heard."

Know Your Internal Customers

Although you spend the bulk of your work day dealing with external customers, your relationships with internal customers can drastically effect your company's bottom line.

The term "internal customers" refers to those people and departments in your company who rely on you to help them serve outside customers.

Thinking about who your internal customers are and what they need from you can help you work in a more efficient and thoughtful manner. To identify your internal customers, ask yourself the following questions:

- * Which departments and employees receive or use the work I do?
- * Who would be unable to do their job if my department stopped working?

After you determine who your internal customers are, figure out what they need from you. For each type of internal customer, ask yourself:

- * What type of information do they need from me to do their job effectively?
- * What materials do they need from me?
- * How fast do they need me to work?
- * How flexible do they need me to be?

Then, brainstorm ways you can tailor your job to better suit the needs of these customers. ■

Example: A customer waiting in line makes a big show of sighing, glaring at you and checking her watch to reveal her impatience.

Ignoring her won't help the situation. Say, in between serving the customers before her, "Ma'am, I'll be with you in just a few minutes." ■

EDITOR IN CHIEF: TEENA ARTMAN

EXECUTIVE EDITOR: AMY PALERMO

PUBLISHER: SUNIL TINANI (SUNILT@ELIRESEARCH.COM)



DARTNELL 2222 SEDWICK ROAD, DURHAM, NC 27713



PHONE: (800) 477-4030 E-MAIL: DARTNELL@DARTNELLCORP.COM

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Avoid Becoming A Horror Story

Customers love to pass on stories about the terrible service they've received. **Warning:** Don't be their horror story!

Being a pro in the business, you've probably passed along a customer-service horror story of your own. Think of a time when a waiter was rude to you or a shop assistant preferred yakking on her cell phone to helping you check out. If you're like most people, you probably let a couple of your friends and family members know about this bad experience and included the name of the business — and perhaps the offending employee — in your anecdote.

Although work can often be busy and stressful, resist the urge to ignore customers or snap at them by thinking of the impression you'll create. The negative vibe created by poor service doesn't end once the customer gets off the phone or leaves your place of business. It goes home with her, and you might very well wind up the main character in her favorite tale of poor service.

But remember that the storytelling impulse works both ways. Customers recall the exceptionally good service as well as the exceptionally bad. If you give a customer excellent service, she's likely to let her friends know about it, and they in turn will be more likely to patronize your business.

So instead of becoming your customer's worst nightmare, aim to be their best customer service dream team! ■

Read Up On Writing

If you're tired of referencing several books and guides every time you're preparing to write a work correspondence — from a business letter to a cover letter or memo — you'll love this great resource.

"How to Write It: A Complete Guide to Everything You'll Ever Write!" promises to be a one-stop resource for every professional and personal writing task you'll ever encounter.

The book's author, **Sandra E. Lamb**, offers straightforward tips on writing e-mails, apology letters, speeches, press releases, reports, thank-you notes and much more. ■

How Well Do You Know Your Teammates?

Are you and your teammates in the right positions for your personalities, goals and skill sets? Using author **Richard Warner's** six categories of employees, you can determine whether you and your teammates are where they belong.

Take the TRUE or FALSE quiz below to find out if you need to reconsider your team's structure.

I have teammates who:

1. Thrive when they're able to take risks.
2. Have a knack for getting themselves and others from Point A to Point B.
3. Seem to know the fundamentals of all the positions in the department.
4. Like positions vital to the department's success, even if they're more "behind-the-scenes."
5. Expect a big raise each year even though their responsibilities have stayed the same.
6. Are determined to do as little work as possible for the highest amount of pay.

Here are the meanings behind answering TRUE to the statements above:

1. **You have "Explorers."** Explorers are creative and enjoy solving difficult problems. They're best suited for leadership roles allowing them to troubleshoot and think strategically.
2. **You may have "Navigators."** A navigator can hold steady while steering others toward a goal.
3. **You could have some "Ship Captains."** Ship captains make excellent leaders. But if you see a ship captain unloading his duties onto someone else, your team leader or supervisor may need to consider demoting him to a more appropriate position.
4. **You have a "First Mate."** A first-mate employee is a great asset to your team because she works hard to improve upon her shortcomings. Thank this type of team member often and encourage her to speak up when she notices a problem.
5. **You have "Crew Members,"** who make up the engine of a workplace.
6. **These are "Stowaways,"** the least desirable type of teammate. ■

Tune Out Distractions

Do you have trouble focusing on what customers are saying? Do you often find your conversations interrupted by background noise or other distractions? If so, here's how you can regain your focus and tune-in your customers:

- Maintain your eye contact with the customer while he's talking. This lets him know that you're paying attention to what he's saying.
- Take notes when an internal or external customer is giving you service instructions, even if you know that you can remember the important details. Taking notes is a great way to force your mind to focus on what the person is
- Catch yourself before you drift off into a day-dream. Don't let your mind wander while a customer is talking to you.

- Ask reflective questions at the end of a customer's request to make sure that you understand his directions. You can recap whatever you might have missed if your focus slipped from the conversation for a moment.

- Listen patiently, even when a customer seems to be rambling and not making a point. You may miss vital information if you just tune him out.

- Don't interrupt the customer. Sometimes it's tempting to interject when you have something important to say, but interrupting someone when they're speaking is always rude.

If you're distracted during a conversation with a customer, you will inevitably make that person feel unimportant. A sharp focus on the customer will make let him know that you're interested in what he has to say. ■

Keep Your Cool With Offensive Customers

Once in a while you'll encounter a customer who attacks you verbally. While your company probably has regulations against your retaliating, you're not completely powerless.

When a customer offends you by swearing, yelling or making insulting remarks, it can be hard to know what to do. Your "fight-or-flight" instincts can kick in, prompting you to either shout back or do anything to calm him down.

But a more productive way of dealing with offensive customers is to set limits with them. Use an "if...then" statement to let them know their behavior has

consequences. For example, you might say:

"If you don't stop yelling, I'm going to have to end this conversation."

Your next step should be to give the customer a choice. After you make your "if...then" statement, say something like:

"It's up to you to decide whether you'd like to continue. But I can't continue unless you calm down."

Handle the process of setting limits in a calm manner so the customer won't take what you say personally. Also, use this technique only as a last resort or in extreme circumstances. ■

Call For Case Studies!

I want to hear about your finest customer service moment! Write to me at teenaa@elijournals.com and tell me how you've helped a customer with exemplary service, gone above and beyond the call of duty to satisfy an angry customer, or how you've gained customer loyalty. Share your success story and I may feature you in an upcoming Case Study column.

Not sure if you handled something appropriately? Our team of experts will critique your performance and offer valuable tips you can put into action with your next customer right away! ■

Check Your Team's Availability With Group Schedule

You need to keep your customer service station staffed but sometimes you'll find yourself in a pinch needing to fill in for an absent employee.

As a team of customer service representatives, knowing each other's availability is a great asset to cover for each other effectively if someone is out during lunch, on an appointment or at a meeting.

Your department can use **Microsoft Outlook's** Group Schedule feature so you can simply put your appointments, lunch times and meetings right in your team schedule. No more calling each other or walking around trying to figure out who's available to cover you, or to make sure there are enough people helping the customers.

Follow these steps to create a group schedule:

1. In your Calendar, select Actions | View Group Schedules, or click the View Group Schedules button on the main toolbar (choose the Schedules button in version 2002.)

2. In the Group Schedules dialog box, click New, and then enter a name for your Group Schedule. Click OK.

3. In the window that appears, click Add Others and select Add From Address Book to open the Select Members dialog box.

4. Select each group member's name and click the To button to add the name to the Group Schedule. (Be sure to add your own name to your Group Schedule list in the Select Members dialog box. If you don't, you won't be able to see whether your appointments conflict with others.)

5. Click OK. Outlook creates a Group Schedule with the names you selected. Click Save And Close to save your new Group Schedule.

When you have each of your team members' schedules where every one can see them, being there for your customers will be a snap. ■

Don't Wait For Spring To Clean Out The Cobwebs

Spring may be the most recent time you did a clean sweep through your workspace, but for some of you, it may be even longer. Wrangling those dust bunnies now is sure to help you out during the dry winter months. You'll also feel good about starting the winter season off germ-free.

Some of the places you may not think of cleaning can be the most dirty. Check this list to make sure your dust bunnies don't have a chance to reproduce:

🏠 **Keyboard.** Believe it or not, this is probably the dirtiest place on your desk. Crumbs from mid-day snacks probably got in there months ago and were never given the chance to get out.

🏠 **Phone.** Take some time to wipe down your receiver, headset and phone base with disinfecting wipes. This can be especially important if your customers use your phone occasionally.

🏠 **Computer screen.** You may not notice how dull your screen looks if you have to look through a thin layer of dust. Give it a quick wipe-down and you may be surprised how bright it is!

🏠 **Cracks and crevices.** Take everything off your desk and clean behind things that always sit in one place. Wipe down the tops of books and folders. ■

Be A Broken Record

When you've got a customer who doesn't want to work with you to solve her problems, try the "broken record" approach: repeat yourself several times using different phrasing until she understands that the conversation will be held on your terms.

For example, you might say, "You have several options: [describe them]. Which would you prefer?" If she continues to insist on having her own way, repeat, "You can do [option one] or [option two]. Do you have a preference?" ■

Foster Teamwork For Stronger Customer Service

In the world of mathematics, the whole is the sum of it's parts. On your service team, the same holds true. Every teammate is crucial to your team's success.

If your customer service department can present a strong and united front, the service you give your customers will be effective and efficient. When your department works as a team, your customers receive a much higher level of service than if your department is acting as many individuals, each with his own agenda.

Teamwork in your department also ensures you provide your customers with consistent and excellent service. But working as a team isn't always easy. The biggest detriment to effective teamwork is a lack of understanding your company's major challenges, says management professor **David Newkirk** of the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business. Your team needs to know — and agree on — the company's goals to make effective decisions quickly.

To understand your company and its challenges better, set up a team meeting in which you discuss the following:

1. Your company's goals.
2. Your company's weaknesses.
3. How your department will address the company's goals and weaknesses with your customers.

When you have these issues open for discussion, you are not only fostering sharing and communication on your team, but you are also staying one step ahead of the customers by ironing out any wrinkles before they may notice them. Working together on these issues gives each member a great opportunity to share his ideas and discuss a broad range of possibilities.

Don't sell your customers short by ignoring the importance of teamwork within your department. Build a strong team by working together to represent your company. ■

Project A Positive Image For Your Company

An primary part of your job is being your company's "face" and "voice". Because you're the person customers will deal with the most, you set the tone for your company.

So go the extra mile and follow these tips to project a positive image for your company:

- ✓ Always take responsibility for your mistakes, and learn from your errors.
- ✓ Show respect for your customers, even when they are being disrespectful towards you. Consistently take the high road.
- ✓ Keep an open mind. When a customer expresses his opinion or ideas, don't be judgmental just because you disagree with him.
- ✓ Share and share alike. Communicate your viewpoint in a respectful manner.
- ✓ React with tact. When you hit bumps in the road, take responsibility for your reactions to obstacles.
- ✓ Listen carefully, and take others' suggestions, concerns and ideas seriously.
- ✓ Empathize with the customer. Share the customer's feelings to create a sense of mutual understanding.

Don't hide behind an automated system. If your company has an automated phone system, give customers your direct line and e-mail address so they can reach you directly. ■

INSIGHT

"To be truly successful, you need to see your business through your customers' eyes. What do they want and need to keep coming back to you time and again?"

~ Laurie Brown

Stop Procrastinating

When you have barely enough time in the day to get through your work; it's crucial that you make sure you aren't wasting time.

Stephanie Winston, author of the books "Getting Organized" and "The Organized Executive" offers these tips to get through your work efficiently:

- ❑ **Divide a task into smaller, more manageable pieces.** When you've broken your task down this way, you can start with the easiest of the tasks.
- ❑ **Clarify the task.** If you need to, get some of your coworkers' opinions on the best way to tackle the task.
- ❑ **Assign benchmarks.** Designate points throughout longer tasks that you can consider completion points. These small victories give you a sense of accomplishment and inspire you to keep going with your remaining tasks.
- ❑ **Use a checklist.** Write down what you need to accomplish for the day and then check off the tasks you've completed.
- ❑ **Set deadlines.** Give yourself time constraints to complete projects within. If you're someone who works better under pressure, setting frequent deadlines will help you push through your work. ■

Strive For Excellent Etiquette For Service That Sells

If you think you can behave any way you like with your customers, think again. Your company's reputation could suffer if you're offending your customers by not caring about your behavior.

Make sure you win them over with perfect behavior on your next customer appointment or call. Use these etiquette tips from **Elinor Stutz**, author of the book "Nice Girls Do Get The Sale: Relationship Building That Gets Results."

Phone Etiquette:

1. When your customer answers the phone, introduce yourself and ask if this is a good time to talk. Give her the chance to set a better time when she'll be available.
2. Never eat or talk to your coworkers while you're helping a customer.
3. Don't take calls on your cell phone when you are in a meeting with a customer.
4. If you're on the phone when your customer arrives for her appointment, end the conversation or ask to call back. Be sure to acknowledge your customer's presence when she arrives.

Face-To-Face Etiquette

1. Look your customer in the eye during your conversation.
2. Do not watch people walk by while you're talking to a customer.
3. Take an active interest in what your customer is saying.

Above all, act professionally each time you work with a customer, no matter if it's in person or on the phone. You represent your agency and want to leave the customer with a good impression. When you present yourself as organized and professional, your customers will look forward to doing business with you and your company. ■

Prevent 'Cube Body'

While your job may not be physically demanding, working in a cubicle all day can take its toll on your body in unexpected ways.

According to registered nurse and massage therapist **Mary Ann Pavlides**, employees who work in cubicles report a common set of complaints which include:

- ✘ upper-back strain due to holding a phone between the shoulder and the ear;
- ✘ lower-back strain from poor posture and sitting too long;
- ✘ poor circulation in the legs; and
- ✘ shortened pectoral muscles caused by hunching over a keyboard.

If you notice any of these ailments, it's time to take action right away. The longer you ignore these symptoms, the more likely they are to transform into something worse.

You can alleviate these conditions by using an ergonomic chair and making sure it's set at a comfortable level. Pavlides also suggests you try the following exercises:

- ✓ Several times a day, get up and walk. Walking about will restore circulation to your legs and give your eyes a rest from staring at the computer screen.
- ✓ To reverse "keyboard hunch," stretch your arms over your head and curve your body into a "C" shape.
- ✓ To keep your leg muscles from cramping, get up and rock back and forth from your toes to your heels several times.
- ✓ Stretch your pectorals by placing your forearms against the frame of an open door and leaning into the doorway. ■

Tell Me What You Think!

Every issue of *Customers First* includes a mix of topics I believe will be of interest to you. But, coming up with this mix is no easy task. To help me ensure this newsletter is filled with articles you care about, please write to me at teenaa@eliresearch.com. I'd love to hear from you! ■

4 Ways To Delight Customers

If you think your goal is to satisfy customers, you're aiming too low. Nothing short of delighting your customers will earn their loyalty.

To surprise and delight your customers today, do these four things:

- 1. Listen.** Allow customers to explain their needs. Do not interrupt, except to ask clarifying questions or acknowledge your understanding.
- 2. Be flexible.** Make doing business with you easy. Being flexible and accommodating will make your customers' service experience convenient and effortless.
- 3. Build a relationship.** Learn more about your customers as individuals and about their specific interests and needs. Establish rapport, and show that you value their business.
- 4. Provide quality service.** Once you've identified your customers' needs, address them promptly. Provide an extra dose of service by following up to be sure they are satisfied. ■

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