



Successful Customer Service

What is Customer Service and why is it so important? What does it mean to be successful in Customer Service?

There are several variations on what Customer Service is and what it means, depending on the products and services you provide and your way of delivering them. We say that Customer Service occurs every time someone at your company interacts with a customer in the delivery of a product or service, or tailors a product or service for an individual customer. In most companies, there are multiple customer “touch-points”, and it is often surprising to discover that people in Sales, Accounting, Product Development, Operations, Marketing, and Leadership are providing a part of the overall service package.

The essential functions of customer service are:

1. Doing the Primary Work,
2. Tailoring or Customizing Products,
3. Providing Support,
4. Sales, and
5. Lead Generation.

The last two may be surprising to you, but read on.

Doing the Primary Work

With service companies, Customer Service most often occurs when the work is done. Accountants, attorneys, printers, painters, consultants, and all manner of service providers engage in Customer Service in the performance of their projects and engagements. Many service companies have no products at all; the only way they deliver value is through the services they provide.

The “Primary Work” can take many forms, and involve many departments at your company. For example, if you design and build products to customer specification, your Sales staff may manage the project, your Product Development staff may design the product, your Financial Management staff may arrange financing or provide special terms, your Legal staff may create special contracts and be heavily involved in the negotiations, your Operations / Manufacturing department will build it, and Customer Service may install and support it. That is a lot of touch-points!

There are special considerations when the service is delivered face-to-face. Then, the relationship established with the customer while the service is being delivered is as important as the quality and the speed of the work. In fact, the customer’s satisfaction may even be more dependent on the relationship than it is with other aspects of the service.

Tailoring or Customizing Products

When a product is modified for the customer, it can be considered to be a form of Customer Service. For example, your Product Development (Engineering) staff may custom design a feature, your Manufacturing staff may be involved with assembling the end product to your customer’s specifications, or your Shipping department may need to provide special packaging or ship the products according to special instructions. Even though they may not have direct contact with the customer, the quality and timeliness of their workmanship will have an impact on customer satisfaction.

Providing Support

Customer support is a form of service that occurs when the customer contacts you after the service is provided (or the product delivered) with a follow-up question or a complaint. Every company that provides a product or service of any kind should be prepared to field inquiries from their customers. It is important that there be a specific methodology for talking to the customer, solving the problem, documenting the solution and the interaction, and escalating the issue up the chain-of-command.

Interestingly, these services may be partially or completely automated. For example, a website that provides troubleshooting wizards is a form of service; so is a help desk that has an extensive automated attendant that answers most questions without the need to talk to a “real human”.

Sales

It is surprising to many companies that Customer Service personnel may have sales responsibilities. While it is a bit of a stretch to say that sales is a function of service, an increasing number of Customer Service agents have sales responsibilities.

In companies that have retail sales and / or telesales, Customer Service and Sales are almost indistinguishable. The sales agent helps the customer find what they want and helps them with buying decisions, which can be considered a service, and when they close the deal, it is a sales function. The customer may also require help after the sale, for example, carrying the product to their car or special packaging, which is definitely a service.

Any time a service provider has contact with the customer, there may be an opportunity to function in a sales capacity by taking a minute to:

1. **Up-sell** (sell more of the same product or service, e.g., “Would you like to Biggie size that order?”),
2. **Cross-sell** (sell a related product or service, e.g., “Would you like fries with that burger?”), and
3. **Request a referral or recommendation**, normally every time the client compliments the company on the quality of service or the value they received.

The bottom line is that many people have Customer Service responsibilities or opportunities, and almost everyone in Customer Service has sales opportunities. Is this confusing? Your bet!

Lead Generation

As with sales, it is probably not appropriate to say that lead generation is a function of Customer Service, but the best companies train their Customer Service staff members to ask for referrals and recommendations, which are the strongest kinds of leads. The best time to ask is whenever you receive a compliment about the quality of the product or services you provide (i.e., “at the point of a compliment”), but some companies say something such as “we appreciate your referrals” every time they talk to a customer.

How are you performing in Customer Service? Do you need training or coaching? Do you have successful problem management and escalation processes in place? Are you taking advantage of your opportunities to sell and gain referrals when providing service?

If we can help you be successful in Customer Service, or any other aspect of your business growth, please give us a call or email!

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