How to Improve Customer Service

Research shows that if we receive good customer service, we will tell two or three people. However, if we experience poor service, we will tell ten to twelve others!

Since word of mouth and on-line recommendations and referrals are often key drivers of new business, all companies should strive to achieve consistently high service levels. With that in mind, here are 20 practical tips on how to improve customer service in your company:

1. Understand customer needs
2. Seek and promote customer feedback
3. Set and communicate clear service standards
4. Delight your customers by exceeding their expectations
5. Capture and share examples of great service
6. Create easy and effortless customer service
7. Personalise your customer service
8. Invest in customer service training
9. Analyse customer concerns and complaints
10. Make it easy for customers to complain
11. Find out what’s really going on
12. Check out your competitors
13. Hold regular internal customer service review sessions
14. Build a customer focused team culture
15. Treat your staff as you treat your customers
16. Involve support team members
17. Set up an employee recognition and reward scheme
18. Set measurable objectives around improved customer service
19. Review individual and team performance regularly
20. Recruit team members with customer orientated behaviours
1. Understand customer needs

The more you get to know your customers, the more you are likely to understand customer needs and expectations. Hence, give some thought to:

- What we currently know about each of our customers
- How helpful is this information? What else would be helpful for us to know so we can better match their needs to our products and services?
- Who else has insights about our customers that could help us? For example, there may be long serving team members who have highly established customer relationships that can shed more insights.
- Where do we store this information? Also consider how safe and compliant this storage of information is.
- What tools do we have access to that can help us capture important customer information? For example, there are simple spreadsheets to full CRM systems that can help you capture and keep up to date this information.

Get your team to help you retrieve and store this valuable information. After that, give some thought to how your product or service could better suit their needs. Further tips are provided in our resource understanding customer needs and expectations. This will help you find the right ways to meet customer aspirations and achieve outstanding customer service.

2. Seek and promote customer feedback

There are many ways to find out what your customers think about the organisation. Firstly, identify which methods are the most viable and rewarding for you. These could include:

- Giving customers the opportunity to provide testimonials and on-line reviews
- Personally asking customers their views after they have used your product or service. For example by phone, face to face or in writing.
• Providing a very short, simple feedback form or survey with an incentive to complete. The easier and shorter to complete the survey, the more responses you are likely to receive.
• Inviting regular customers to share their views of your organisation on an individual basis. Some will be willing and eager to help you, especially if you want to build on the things they like and value you for.

See meeting customer needs for more information.

3. Set and communicate clear service standards

Set some simple customer service standards that team members can easily understand and implement. You can also include the team members in this process if you’re seeking total engagement. Further tips are provided in our resource customer service training ideas. This will provide current and new team members with the initial expectations for delivering great customer service. After that, team members who are really empowered, will create their own high levels of engaging and effortless customer service.

When setting customer service standards, consider:

• The tone and type of language that best represents your values and service ethics. For example, formal versus informal style of language.
• Your main customer contact point, so there is a consistency of approach throughout the customer experience.
• Support processes needed to ensure the consistent delivery of these standards. For example, customer communication templates.
• Resources available, such as staffing levels and technology.
• Realistic timescales for delivering customer service, especially at your busiest times. For example, answering the telephone within three rings.
4. Delight your customers with exceeding their expectations

How often are your customers being delighted by receiving something more than they were expecting and of value to them? Surprising your customer in this way, as long as their basic needs are being met, can engender customer appreciation and future loyalty. Firstly, you might consider recognising customers’ special events and occasions, or meaningful milestones of customer loyalty. Or secondly, an extension to the product or service they have purchased.

Special or additional ‘touches’ often get referred to within the customer’s local or on-line community. This can really help to raise your credibility and encourage new referrals to your organisation. See delighting your customers for further information.

5. Capture and share examples of great service

Identify the best way to capture customer feedback across the organisation. You can also include feedback from peers and managers where they notice a team member giving exceptional customer service. From here, you can build a toolkit of best practice within your organisation.

Customer feedback can also tie in to an employee recognition scheme to give recognition to the individual or team who delivered the exceptional service. Recognition in this way means employees are more likely to ‘go the extra mile’ for their customers. They also know their efforts are being noticed in this way by their employer.

6. Create easy and effortless customer service

Follow your customer’s journey, from the way customers find and buy your organisation’s service and products, to billing and after sales support. In particular, look for ways of streamlining customer service processes at each stage of their journey.
Take a look at:

- The ease in which a customer can find your organisation.
- The clarity in which we articulate what we do as a business. How easy is it to understand from a lay person’s point of view?
- The number of ways a customer can contact you and how accessible you are on a 24/7 basis. For example, by telephone, email, live chat, social media, web site contact form
- Any barriers and time delays customers experience in getting a response from you

The quicker and easier it is for the customer to buy your products and services, the more likely they are to use your service in the first instance.

Successful businesses:

- Explain clearly without jargon how their products and services work and will be delivered to the customer.
- Pre-empt customer questions by explaining what to expect at every stage of the customer journey. This avoids customers asking similar questions about your products and services.
- Pre-empt, resolve and permanently eliminate potential product and service problems for the customer.

In conclusion, the more effortless you make your service, the more repeat customers you are likely to retain. Some research shows that customers opt for ease first, rather than just relying on a previously good experience to make their next purchase.

7. Personalise your customer service

Take time to engage with your customers to find out what their needs really are. As a result, you will be able to provide customers with the product or service options to fully meet their needs. This will really help, as you strive to improve customer service standards.
In order to achieve a personalised service, consider how well your team members:

- Greet your customers and make them feel welcome.
- Respond in a way appropriate to the customer’s personality and lifestyle.
- Use your customers name.
- Ask open questions to find out their needs.
- Really listen and reflect back to the customer a summary of their needs.
- Appear genuinely interested in the customer as well as their situation.
- Pick up seamlessly from a previous colleague’s conversation with the customer.
- Demonstrate empathy when the customer shares a difficult or poor experience.
- Go out of their way to find the best solution for the customer.

Personalising service in this way will also help you build trust with your customers. In addition, there are many tools such as CRM systems that enable you to capture relevant client historical information. Along with the provision of training and coaching; reinforced with great performance recognition, you can embed this level of personalised customer service and customer loyalty.

8. Invest in customer service training

Choose a training provider who will really get to know your business and who can support your business strategy and service standards. An experienced and engaging training provider will be able to support you and your team in delivering personalised, tailored customer service, in a sustainable way.

Alternatively, you could develop your own internal customer service training programme to raise the importance of customer service, product knowledge and skills within the team. For top tips with a range of practical activities and exercises, see our customer service training ideas. Your training provider should be able to support and guide you in selecting the best activities to achieve your goals in the most effective way.
You may also wish to train your team leaders to deliver regular bite-size customer service training sessions. This can link with their regular team briefing sessions.

Lastly, provide the team leaders with the resources they will need to deliver these bite-size sessions. For example, supply laminated cards, posters, activities, exercises and products, as well as training guides.

9. Analyse customer concerns and complaints

Get to the root cause of your customers’ concerns and complaints to find out what is going wrong and why. It will help if you have a structured system for storing all customer feedback, concerns and complaints. Once you have the information stored together, review the data and ask yourself:

- What patterns are emerging?
- When do these complaints mainly occur?
- How are customers registering their concerns and complaints?
- In the main, what is letting us down? e.g. people, processes, policies?

Share this data with representatives in your organisation who are best placed to provide the broadest of insights into why these complaints may be happening. Most importantly, before any review meeting set some guiding principles to ensure participants contribute in the most effective way. For example, ‘we will listen to and respect all contributions, we will look at the data objectively and with the intention of building on what we currently do well’.

10. Make it easy for customers to complain

Consider how easy it is for your customers to make their concerns and complaints known to you. An easy process will capture the full extent of your customers’ experiences and enable you to really improve customer service. You will also help prevent future customer complaints.
Most customer focused organisations, dependent upon their size, have a transparent complaint handling process that it understood at all levels.

There are usually three stages:

- **Stage 1** maps out how front-line staff will initially respond to the customer complaint. This will normally include what they will say in response to customer feedback, concerns or objections and different severity of complaint. It will also include the response timescales and what the next steps will be.

- **Stage 2** forms part of an escalation process to a team leader or manager, mapping out how the complaint will be dealt with. This stage is normally activated when the customer is either not happy with the initial front-line response or has written in to complain.

- **Stage 3** usually involves the most senior manager to objectively review the whole complaint and how the complaint has been handed internally. They will make a final decision on behalf of the organisation to either uphold the original decision at stage 2 or to offer a different solution to the customer.

Set some clear boundaries of responsibilities in handling the complaint. Alongside this, map out the level of compensation an individual at each stage has the authority to offer customers.

### 10.1 Complaint handling review

Finally, conduct a periodic review on how effective your complaint handling process is at each stage to identify improvements that can be made.

Take a look at our tips for [handling customer complaints](#). Also consider some remedial training and coaching.
11. Find out what’s really going on

Shadow team members in the organisation to find out what is really going on. Choose different functions and team members that will give you the whole view of how customer needs are being fulfilled within the organisation.

Then on several occasions observe and work closely with these staff members. This will help show you how your systems and processes affect the customer. Importantly, it will also identify what obstacles get in the way of delivering consistent high levels of customer service. Hence choose team members who are open and keen to support the initiative.

Some large organisations go a step further and go ‘under cover’ as either a new employee or customer to gain these insights.

12. Check out your competitors

Give your staff the opportunity to see what level of customer service your competitors are offering. You may even include other organisations that are not competitors but are known to offer great customer service. Some of their customer practices may be adoptable in your organisation. Check out ideas on how to do this in our resource customer service training ideas.

Once your staff have reviewed your competitors, get them to share their experience with the rest of the team. From these insights, you can identify the best practice ideas that you want to adopt within your own organisation. For suggestions on the areas you may want to review, take a look at our resource mystery shopping.

13. Hold regular internal customer service review sessions

Internal customer service reviews or forums, when set up well, can provide you with some great ideas to improve customer service. Your staff work
with customers on a daily basis, so if they are encouraged to be open and honest without any repercussions, they will share valuable insights.

Firstly, focus on getting the basics consistently right. Then get your staff to think of ways that they can ‘add value’ or create special ‘wow’ moments for your customers. Balance this with reviewing customer complaints or concerns expressed within this forum, once you have built the level of team member trust.

Lastly, use the creativity of the group to generate a diverse range of solutions and stimulate more radical and less obvious ideas. See tips on developing creativity and facilitating groups, to get the most from these sessions.

14. Build a customer focused team culture

These teams are built and maintained by focusing all their communications, performance measures and processes on the customer.

Some critical steps need to be taken in order to generate a customer focused team culture:

- Focus the team on delivering exceptional levels of customer service.
- Ensure job roles are clearly defined and focused on the customer. As a result, team members can see how they contribute to the wider customer service strategy and goals.
- Assess team members performance against delivering great customer service on a regular and effective basis.
- Define exceptional customer service for your organisation, i.e. what does it look, sound and feel like?
- Measure the consistency of customer orientated behaviours displayed from front-line team members. These behaviours include a warm and engaging communication style, as well as showing interest and listening to others’ views. In addition, a strong desire to help and do their best for others.
- Observe proficient administration and execution of customer orders from your customer support team members. These normally require
slightly different behaviours, such as strong task orientation, meeting deadlines, attention to detail and desire for quality.

- Align team members’ motivations and communication style to the job tasks they undertake.
- Encourage the collaboration of team members with their internal and external colleagues. This is particularly valuable where they work well with those who have different personal motivations and behavioural attributes. They provide a fantastic balance in the team.

Lastly, to help cement a high performance team culture, see our tips on building high performance teams.

15. Treat your staff as you treat your customers

‘Behaviour breeds behaviour’ and happy staff lead to happy customers. Paying as much attention to the needs of your staff as you do your customers will help improve your overall customer service. If team members feel valued by their managers and the organisation as a whole, they are likely to perform better and engage with your customers well.

Review how your staff feel about the organisation and their managers. Some of the options include staff surveys, staff representative schemes and internal forums. A word of caution, different staff members will value different aspects of what you provide them with, so a range of schemes and practices will be important. For example, these could include but not be limited to:

- clear, transparent internal communications
- flexible working practices
- regular one to one reviews
- effective performance management
- team ‘check ins’
- well-being programmes
- employee assistance schemes
- health and fitness services
- recognition and reward schemes
Managers who really engage with team members and take time to find out about their lives and concerns will really help you succeed in looking after your staff and in turn, your customers.

For help read our tips for engaging with customers.

16. Involve support team members

Get team members from functions such as Finance, HR, Quality, Procurement involved with any initiative that includes your frontline customer teams. These team members impact your customer service but are often overlooked and can therefore feel undervalued by the organisation.

Look at ways to increase the team working and understanding between each of these support functions with the customer facing teams. Bring them together to improve customer service. You may also reduce any internal conflict that has arisen in the past, often due to misunderstanding and lack of awareness of differing priorities.

17. Set up an employee recognition and reward scheme

Implement a simple recognition and reward scheme that focuses on delivering exceptional customer service and fits with your organisation’s culture. Consider what forms of recognition and reward will motivate team members the most. Naturally, any scheme you come up has to be commercially viable. However, if well thought through, the scheme will normally pay for itself with the additional customer service results achieved.

Employee schemes can include:

- small ‘thank you’ gift e.g. chocolates, gift voucher, theatre tickets
- outstanding recognition
- long service awards
- corporate gamification
- gratitude on social media
• additional time off e.g. long weekend
• peer nomination scheme for exceptional customer service
• team performance awards
• senior manager ‘thank you’ in person, email, letter, certificate

If you’re still not sure what will be the most rewarding to your employees, ask them what they would prefer. You can then gain feedback on the scheme through staff surveys and performance reviews.

18. Set measurable objectives around improved customer service

Focus team members on improving customer service by setting measurable objectives and reviewing their progress on a regular basis. Align these objectives to your overall customer service strategy and business goals.

SMART objectives are usually set to ensure they are clearly defined and measured. This process also ensures that you match resources and processes to support the effective achievement of the standard set. Here is an example of a SMART standard in a customer contact setting is:

• “We will answer all calls within 5 rings using a personalised and friendly verbal handshake”. This will include “Good morning/afternoon, Company name, Team member name speaking, how can I help you?”

This standard provides clear expectations for both team members, their manager and the customer. It’s a great way to clearly review the factors impacting on the consistent delivery of your organisation’s customer service. In this example:

• Specific - Customers know exactly what to expect and team members know what the organisation expects from them
• Measurable - Call handling times can be monitored
• Achievable - Sufficient team members on phone lines per shift in line with the projected call volume data

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• Relevant - Provides a warm first impression to the customer when they call
• Time Bound - Provides team members with a way to self-evaluate their performance

19. Review individual and team performance regularly

Undertake regular performance reviews, not just during the annual appraisal. Also consider what time frames and format work best for you and your teams. For example, daily briefings, weekly ‘check ins’, monthly one to one reviews, quarterly and half-yearly formal reviews.

Include a review of how team members contribute towards a set team objective, as well as how they actively support each other at work. This can be achieved through your normal one to one reviews or you can facilitate a ‘round table’ discussion where you ask the team to review each team members performance and contribution to the team. For example, ask questions such as:

‘To deliver exceptional customer service, what should the team member …’ or ‘To actively support the team, what should the team member …’

• Continue doing
• Start doing
• Stop doing

Ensure there are also regular times for reviewing the team members well-being. You can also give feedback on their performance and identify any support that is needed. For example, give feedback about what is going well, as well as offering coaching for skills needing development. For specific help with this, see our resource performance appraisal methods.
20. Recruit team members with customer orientated behaviours

As we mentioned previously, different team members perform better at different tasks dependant on their motivations, skills and behavioural attributes. With this in mind, here are some steps to take when recruiting new team members:

- Capture the different behavioural attributes needed for your team. Competencies that are often used in organisations are comprised of the critical behaviours, skills, values and personal motivations needed. They enable you to form a consistent framework for measuring different candidates against. This will ensure you are more likely to recruit the right person rather than a reliance on your gut instinct or collective perceptions.

- Ensure that the job description is highly customer focused and reflects exactly what the job entails.

- Implement a range of selection assessment techniques that measure both the skills required for the job, as well as the important customer orientated behaviours. These assessment techniques can include competency-based interviews, specific job tasks and customer communication activities. They will show you how well the candidate engages with a client. Examples of these include, taking a customer enquiry, responding to a customer's set of questions, handling a customer concern or complaint. Whilst the candidate won't necessarily have the knowledge of your products and services, you will quickly see how they engage with others.

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