

Achieving brilliant customer service

If you want your customers to keep coming back to you, getting your customer service right is vital. We asked the Institute of Customer Service to give us their tips for customer satisfaction.

1. Recruitment and training

People with the right attitude are essential to building a successful customer service approach – ‘hire for attitude, train for skills’ should be the maxim. Once in place, a planned training programme in both job skills and people skills must be maintained. This is not an area for cost cutting if the market gets tough. Consider formal customer service qualifications for all staff, such as SVQs/NVQs or Institute of Customer Service Professional Awards.

2. Keep your staff happy

Staff retention is crucial to improving your businesses customer service strategy. Research also shows clearly that staff stay when they are happy and respect the organization for which they work. Efforts should therefore be directed at recognition and development programmes to determine potential, and a well thought-out career plan structure.

Research also shows that high employee satisfaction leads directly to high customer satisfaction. Staff can also be a major source of feedback on your products and services.

3. Recognize the importance of customer loyalty

Every business should remember it is far cheaper to retain existing customers than win new ones. Long-term customers are also loyal and active advocates of your organization, and they tend to be more profitable for you, more interested in helping you improve your products and services and more forgiving of any of your occasional mistakes.

Getting customer service right in an organization, and continually improving it, is a long-term commitment that must be made by those at the top of any business. They need to recognize its importance from the outset, believe in the strategy, be active in leading by example to others, and take actions that support those charged with carrying it out on the ‘frontline’.

4. Welcome complaints

Complaints are free market research and should be welcomed. 1) Ensure that you are hearing about all of them. 2) Satisfactorily resolve the ones you get. 3) Stop them being repeated. 4) Learn lessons and pass these on to others. This might even lead to a short-term increase in complaints but this is artificial – you always had them but didn’t know about it.

5. Make sure you use technology for all the right reasons

If any of these technologies are being deployed primarily as a quick fix to reduce costs then it is doubtful whether real improvements in customer service levels will be gained, especially in the long-term. However, if they are to be considered as an integral part of a strategy which is focusing on your customers, one or more of them could be useful, but don’t rely on technology to solve all your issues – it can only do that as part of an integrated strategy.

To be proud of and promote but be aware that customers can see through the marketing hype when it comes to service much easier than they can with products. Remember you need to demonstrate that you are good at customer service rather than talk about it. Having your customers recommend you is better than self-promotion. In marketing, for a long time product was 'king' and an organization built its reputation on this. Nowadays there is a growing push for service quality to be recognized as the real builder and retainer of reputation.

6. Build a reputation

A good reputation for customer service is a key factor in successful business results, and research has shown that to do this well an organization should concentrate on four key issues – going the extra mile, treating people as individuals, keeping promises made, and handling queries and complaints well. Your excellent customer service can be a point of difference and set you apart from your competitors.

7. Measure your performance

Make sure that you assess the right variables, not just the easiest ones to record. The two things that you should always do are to measure employee and customer satisfaction/delight. The true question is – are you doing it to give yourself a warm feeling inside, or to see where you have to make changes? Also put yourself in your customer's shoes – what does your service feel like? Ask a friend to be a 'secret shopper' and relay their experience to you.

Benchmarking can be a key part of your measurement programme. Learning from other sectors can often be much more beneficial than same sector comparisons, as one can see new ways of approaching issues and problems. Measuring and comparing the same things over time is much better than just a one-off view/comparison, as trends can be observed and learned from.

8. Communicating with staff and customers

The full involvement in, and commitment of both staff and customers to, your company's customer service strategy can depend greatly on your skills at communicating with them. Keeping people informed at all levels within your business, recognizing good performance, celebrating success, marketing your services and achieving all of the points outlined requires a coordinated strategy of communications.

A reputation for great service can be easily lost by a poor telephone answering system, confusing website, or lack of a sound communications approach. Test it regularly and continually enhance it as new technologies develop.

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