



Customer Service Basics

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Why are Customers Important?

In his classic book, *How to Win Customers and Keep them for Life*, Dr. Michael LeBoeuf tells a story that explains why customers are the most important assets of any business. The story goes something like this.

A pair of high-school sweethearts walked into a jewelry store looking for an inexpensive ring-sizer. This was during a time when a young lady wore her boyfriend's class ring on her first finger. A small metal piece placed inside the ring could make the ring a few sizes smaller.

The couple tried the "fancy" jewelry store located in the prime downtown corner location. It was the store that advertised everywhere and often. Everyone in town knew about this jewelry store, including our young couple. Unfortunately, the salesperson at the fancy jewelry store could not be bothered with a couple of kids trying to make a two dollar purchase.

Having been shown the door, so to speak, our young couple found their way to a small "mom and pop" jewelry store. This store did not have a prime location. It did not have a popular television jingle or a billboard on the highway. It did have outstanding customer service.

Mom and Pop sold the teens the inexpensive spacer. They also treated them like royalty.

Fast forward a few years. These teens have graduated from college and are now about to get married. They are about to spend thousands of dollars on engagement and wedding rings. It's not difficult to imagine where they went to make their purchase. They went to Mom and Pop.

Oh, by the way, Mom and Pop are now located in the prime location. Mom and Pop have the billboard on the highway. That other place? They went out of business.

LeBoeuf's story is a perfect demonstration of why all customers are important. It also demonstrates why a company's customer base is truly its greatest asset.

Go Above and Beyond

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service offers a workshop called PRIDE Customer Service. The workshop teaches basic customer service skills to frontline employees, their managers or anyone who ever has to interact with the

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facts.okstate.edu



public. The workshop is based heavily on the classic book by LeBoeuf.

PRIDE is an acronym. It stands for Producing Resourceful Informed Devoted Employees.

An important principle of customer service, according to LeBoeuf, (and taught at the PRIDE training) is to make sure to exceed customer's expectations. The idea is that a customer visits a company because he or she has a need of some sort. If a business just meets that need, is this perceived as high-quality customer service? Probably not. The truth is, a customer often has expectations that go above and beyond just getting their basic needs met.

Here is an example shared by a clerk who works at a convenience store. Let's call her Sarah. Sarah participated in a PRIDE workshop and said she has customers who come in every weekday morning. One customer, let's call him John, comes in every day to buy his morning coffee and his cigarettes. Perhaps it is not politically-correct to use this cigarette example, but it is a true story as told to us by Sarah.

Sarah correctly observed that John's needs were to purchase his coffee and his cigarettes, but like most customers, he had additional expectations. John expected Sarah to be able to call him by name and to know his brand of cigarettes. He expected her to grab his brand of cigarettes off the shelf and place a pack on the counter...before he even asked! Why wouldn't he expect this? He comes in every single day.

What can you do in your own business to meet more than just the basic needs? What can you do to go “above and beyond” for your customers? The answers will be different for different kinds of businesses.

A clerk in a county treasurer’s office said that during tax time when lines are long, she hands out candy to children who are waiting in line with their parent. (She asks permission, of course.)

A city manager shared that he created a waiting area with comfortable chairs and free Wi-Fi. Prior to this change, city patrons just had to wait in a line in an uninviting open space. Over the years, people have come to expect that drive-through bank tellers will have suckers for our kids and even dog treats for our pets. Banks have long understood that customers get a great deal of satisfaction from smiling tellers and the smell of fresh popcorn in the lobby on Fridays.

To help you think about how to go above and beyond for your customers, follow these three steps.

1. Make a list of your different kinds of customers.
2. For each category of customer, remind yourself of their basic reasons for doing business with you.
3. For each kind of customer, think about what they TRULY expect from you. Do they expect you to know their name? Do they expect you to be able to give good directions to the little league ball park? Do they expect you to help them fill out paperwork?

Of course, you are the best judge of what your customers might expect. Take a few minutes and go through this exercise. Ask employees to talk through these three questions as a group. Once you’ve come up with some ways to go above and beyond, start doing them!

Keep Track of Moments of Truth

When an employee gives you a sincere smile, when your child is handed a piece of candy, when the fabulous smell of fresh popcorn assails your nostrils, you’ve just had a “moment of truth” with a business. A moment of truth happens whenever a customer comes in contact with your business. Moments of truth may happen in person, by phone or even through email, Facebook or your website.

The moments of truth described above are all positive, but customers can have negative moments of truth as well. Here are just a few examples of negative moments of truth.

- An employee doesn’t look up from their personal cell phone when a customer enters the office.
- The customer can’t find an employee to assist them.
- The person who answers the phone sounds bored and acts as though helping the customer is an imposition.
- The store/office environment is dirty, unkempt.
- Bathrooms are not clean.
- Signage is not clear, so patrons don’t understand what they are supposed to do or where they should go.
- Parking is not available, or is not well-lit after dark.
- Unpleasant sounds fill the store, such as a television on high volume.
- The store has an unpleasant odor.
- The website is difficult to navigate and basic information cannot be found by the user.

The goal for any business or organization is to minimize the negative moments and maximize the positive moments.

The result should be that the positive moments outweigh the negative ones so the customer feels good about doing business with that company and wants to come back.

Sometimes negative moments of truth are inevitable. County employees who have attended PRIDE trainings often share that the security checkpoint at the entrance of their building can be a big negative. No one likes going through security, but unfortunately, they have become a necessity for many government buildings. How does an organization handle this big negative moment? A number of county employees have told us that while the security checkpoint is a negative moment of truth, the attitude of the security guards can be a big enough positive to impact the patrons.

These employees have told us about security guards who are more than just friendly. They ask good questions. They provide assistance when necessary. They know where all the various offices are located in the building and can give directions.

In fact, one thing discovered from the PRIDE program participants over the years is that a positive human moment of truth can easily outweigh other negative moments.

Paying taxes is not something anyone wants to do, but when the county treasurer’s staff is genuinely friendly, people walk away from the transaction feeling a little better about it. The bottom line: a sincere smile and a friendly attitude go a long way in any kind of business or organization.

To visualize the moments of truth in your own business or organization, consider the following two activities.

1. Sit down with employees and list your moments of truth. Be honest about listing both positive and negative moments. Pretend you are a customer and walk yourself through your store or office. How are you treated? What do you experience? What do you see? Smell? Hear? Once you’ve identified some of your negative moments of truth, take steps to eliminate them, if possible. If it is not possible (e.g. security checkpoints), think what positive moments can be added to the situation so that the positives will outweigh the negatives.
2. Find someone who is not familiar with your office or store and have them do a walk-through. This is the “secret shopper” idea. Big companies strategically hire people to do this. Small businesses probably don’t have the resources for that, but friends, relatives, Chamber of Commerce representatives and your county Extension educator may be willing to help.



Six Hospitality Habits

Going above and beyond for customers is indicative of your attitude or mission with respect to customer service. Managing the moments of truth is about making sure the environment of your business is all about pleasing customers. There is one more component that must be considered—employees.

Your employees must be taught the six hospitality habits. They must also understand that you, the business owner, fully expect them to develop these habits. As with most things, the best thing to do is to lead by example.

The Six Hospitality Habits are as follows:

1. **Make a Good First Impression.** It's been said that you have 6 seconds to make a first impression. Frankly, it's probably less than that. Frontline employees should have a friendly demeanor and a quick, sincere smile that can be seen in their eyes and heard in their voices. Of course, they should always be neat and tidy.
2. **Know Your Job.** Customers can often be forgiving of employees who don't know how to do their job correctly, but frankly it is still annoying. It is still a negative. Know how to use the necessary equipment, including the phone. Know everything there is to know about your product or service.
3. **Know Your Community.**
 - a. *Know your competitors.* If you don't have a particular product in stock, you will actually build more loyalty by referring a customer to a competitor.
 - b. *Know your neighbors.* Recommend the wonderful new restaurant around the corner to customers.
 - c. *Know the common destinations in your town.* Do travelers ever ask for directions? Visitors to town frequently stop at restaurants and convenience stores to ask for directions to ball fields, schools and other major attractions.
 - d. *Know community events.* Invite customers to come back to town for local festivals. Be sure you are well-staffed on those days. If there is a festival going on, there will be more people than normal. It's a big negative moment if you are not prepared.
4. **Communicate Clearly.** Good communication almost always begins with listening. Listen to customers, particularly if they are making a complaint. Listening means that you are truly hearing what the customer is saying. This is not the same as planning how to respond while

they are speaking. After listening, ask good questions until you fully understand their needs. Be prepared to answer their questions.

5. **Handle Problems Effectively.** It's a wonderful truth that good customer service can turn something that began as a problem and make it into a positive experience. For example, a restaurant customer complained because she was charged for an appetizer that she had ordered, but never received. The waitress not only fixed the ticket, she also presented the customer with a free dessert and a coupon for a free appetizer on her next visit! This disgruntled customer became a loyal customer! And it all started because of a problem.
6. **Make a Good Last Impression.** Thank the customer for coming. Invite them to come back. The bottom line is that you must make them feel good about their choice to do business with you. If they do, they will come back.

Little Things Can Make a Big Difference

A YouTube video called "The Simple Truths of Service" aka "Johnny the Bagger" is good resource. A link to the video has been provided in the resource list.

Johnny is a grocery bagger who has Downs Syndrome. Johnny has decided to make a difference. Each night his dad helps him print many copies of a "saying of the day." Johnny places a copy of the day's quote in a bag for each shopper. The customers love it and Johnny's checkout line is always many times longer than any of the other lines.

It's not about big things. It's about little things that come from the heart.

PRIDE Customer Service Workshop

If you are interested in participating in a PRIDE Customer Service workshop, contact your County Extension office. Visit www.PRIDE.okstate.edu for more information.

Resources

LeBoeuf, Michael. How to Win Customers and Keep Them for Life. New York City: Berkley Publishing Group, 1987.
McMillen, Michael. (2009). The Simple Truths of Service [video] Retrieved October 31, 2018 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sepARXV8MRI>.

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

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The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest, most successful informal educational organization in the world. It is a nationwide system funded and guided by a partnership of federal, state, and local governments that delivers information to help people help themselves through the land-grant university system.

Extension carries out programs in the broad categories of agriculture, natural resources and environment; family and consumer sciences; 4-H and other youth; and community resource development. Extension staff members live and work among the people they serve to help stimulate and educate Americans to plan ahead and cope with their problems.

Some characteristics of the Cooperative Extension system are:

- The federal, state, and local governments cooperatively share in its financial support and program direction.
- It is administered by the land-grant university as designated by the state legislature through an Extension director.
- Extension programs are nonpolitical, objective, and research-based information.
- It provides practical, problem-oriented education

for people of all ages. It is designated to take the knowledge of the university to those persons who do not or cannot participate in the formal classroom instruction of the university.

- It utilizes research from university, government, and other sources to help people make their own decisions.
- More than a million volunteers help multiply the impact of the Extension professional staff.
- It dispenses no funds to the public.
- It is not a regulatory agency, but it does inform people of regulations and of their options in meeting them.
- Local programs are developed and carried out in full recognition of national problems and goals.
- The Extension staff educates people through personal contacts, meetings, demonstrations, and the mass media.
- Extension has the built-in flexibility to adjust its programs and subject matter to meet new needs. Activities shift from year to year as citizen groups and Extension workers close to the problems advise changes.

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