

## Interpersonal Skills and Customer Service

At a time when customer demands are higher than ever, and quality service is an expectation, rather than a perk, many business people still fail to see improved customer service as a priority.

My firm recently conducted a study around customer service training needs. We surveyed people working in different industries, with titles from ranging manager to Senior Vice President. We had two questions with responses which we found curious. First we asked, “Does your organization have a need for customer service training?” All of our participants answered that they did not have a need for customer service training (many citing the company’s lack of a call center).

So we moved onto the second question, “What type of training does your organization need?” We got the following responses, among others:

- Relationship building
- Relationship management
- Cross culture and intergenerational communication
- Leader communication
- Conflict management
- Employee engagement
- Public speaking

You may not find any of these surprising, And they aren’t—in and of themselves. But here’s the kicker: All of these skills are necessary to providing excellent customer service. In a way, nearly all of our participants contradicted their response to the first question, “do you need customer service training?” to which they had answered, “No.”

It is a common misconception that customer service only encompasses skills required by call center representatives. In truth, all of the above skills are pieces to a complete, comprehensive customer service approach. As our chief marketing analyst said, “Most participants interpret ‘customer services’ as an externally focused service and ‘communication skills’ are viewed as a separate training need.” It’s no wonder why none of the participants valued customer service training—They didn’t think through the broader picture.

The first step in helping people make the connection between customer service skills and the skills mentioned as “needs” comes with a broader understanding of customer service itself. Take the image of a call center—now forget it. Ignore the Kohl’s employee and return receipts. Hotel concierge? These are all narrow examples of customer service professionals. The truth is, rising critiques in customer care and business practices have changed the definition of customer service altogether.

Today, the wise firm includes both internal and external customers in its CS focus. When this shift happens conceptually, communication skills become the new pivot point around all customer service skills. From daily interactions to boardroom meetings—all interpersonal skills fall under the customer service umbrella.

Communications expert Stephanie Dollschnieder suggests this approach: “Think of your own job title. In your mind, you should add ‘Customer Service’ to the end of whatever is printed on your business card. After all,” she says, “you have the responsibility of providing service of some kind to your colleagues, co-workers, employees, and leaders.”

Let's refer back to the list of skills we gleaned from the survey responses. We'll examine each concept briefly to better understand its relevance within the realm of customer service.

### **Relationship Building**

Relationship building is imperative to obtaining and maintaining customers, and creating cohesion among customers. There is an old adage: *All things being equal, people buy from people they like*. It's well known that relationship building and selling are linked almost inseparably. Creating authentic relationships with customers, shareholders, leaders, and employees will keep each party engaged and interested.

### **Client Relationship Management (CRM)**

If CRM is the software, relationship-building is the soft skill. Though many businesses make use of computer databases to collect and store information on clients and customers, it is important to remember the information is useless unless it gets used. Utilizing relationship building skills in conjunction with a good CRM is an effective strategy that will leave your clients feeling valued and comfortable.

### **Cross Culture and Intergenerational Communication**

These two skills are key to maintaining and improving business operations and sales in today's globally integrated environment. A recent Forbes article reported that, for the first time, people from five different generations are represented in the American workforce simultaneously. One can imagine that differences in cultural background and age gaps can sometimes hinder business operations. This includes sales, leadership, and certainly customer relations.

### **Leadership Communication**

While the participants in our survey didn't connect leadership communication with customer service, it is likely one of the most compelling factors in excellent customer service. It's true that good communication invariably trickles down to the front lines. When c-suite executives demonstrate good communication, lower-level employees notice. This comes down to "walking the talk." People who regularly interact with external customers are able to see real examples of professional communication and true service from the top.

In addition, creating a corporate culture of service is a responsibility that begins with the company's leaders—This means leadership needs to see their management, employees, and assistants as customers who deserve quality service. Quite honestly, it's naïve to expect progress or success on any given project without service being granted upwards, downwards, and laterally across all positions.

### **Conflict Management**

It is easy to see the relationship conflict management has to customer service; We have all heard of irate customers, and dealt with unhappy colleagues. True service professionals have mastered the art of diffusing both types of unhappy customers. Development of conflict resolution skills are at the heart of service interactions.

### **Employee Engagement**

Employee engagement has long held ties to customer satisfaction. For example, a 2012 study demonstrated that the correlation between happy employees and happy customers is stronger than the relationship between sleeping pills and sleep.<sup>1</sup> Simply put, when employees are happy, customers are happy. With empirically proven connections, it is surprising more companies don't emphasize employee engagement as a means to improved customer satisfaction.

## Public Speaking

Likely the most difficult stretch for many people is the connection between customer service skills and public speaking skills. Obviously public speaking is a valued communication skill, but when do we see it in play for customer service? Apple is a great example of this. With 500 Million users, when CEO Tim Cook gets up on stage, he is addressing the world. Now, it's not likely your business is regularly addressing 500 million customers with one speech, but leaders and managers often find themselves in situations where they are selling to their colleagues or employees. This can be an idea, a new plan, or an actual sales pitch. Either way, one thing is certain; you'll need to communicate the message effectively in order to serve your customers, whether they are your employees, coworkers, or clients.

Customer service is a deceptively broad topic. The skill sets involved in becoming an exceptional service provider are all transferrable to many other situations. Having and making use of excellent interpersonal skills is invaluable when it comes to everyday operations, and long-term career goals. Seeing these skills as necessary components to both internal and external customer service is an important part of being successful in business today.

So next time someone asks what you do, I hope that you'll say, "I'm an IT Supervisor and Customer Service Professional" or "CFO-- Customer Service." If people accept the notion that providing service to external customers is what will keep their business, thus keep their companies viable, they must also accept that interpersonal skills will ultimately help to satisfy those demands.

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<sup>1</sup> Winkler, Konig, Kleinmann. "New insights into an old debate: Investigating the temporal sequence of commitment and performance at the business unit level." *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 85.3 (2012): 503-522. Print.