



This Month in Customer Service

## Adjusting to the new normal

While some people have been working in the office throughout the pandemic, others are just returning this month. What they'll find will be different and it will require some adjustment.

We're used to standing right behind people in the cafeteria line, happily passing inches apart in corridors, and leaning in for at-your-desk coaching sessions, so we'll need to rethink some boundaries and adapt to new office layouts, new schedules, and potentially new ways of working.

Stressful? Yes. But the following tips can help during periods of rapid change:

- Let go of the past
- Accept the change
- Stay positive
- Focus on what you can control
- Stay connected to coworkers

That last one is very important. Even if you're not bumping into coworkers in the breakroom it's important to maintain contact and personal connections.

## The power of questions

**How may I help you? May I have your account number? Which option would you prefer? Can you tell me more about that?**

All day, every day, frontline reps are gathering information — from customers, from coworkers, and from managers. The key to getting the best information is being ready to ask the right questions and to listen carefully to the answers.

For some people, questioning comes easily, say researchers Alison Wood Brooks and Leslie K. John in *Harvard Business Review*. “Their natural inquisitiveness, emotional intelligence, and ability to read people put the ideal question on the tip of their tongue.” But for others, it's a learning process. The good news, says Wood Brooks, is that “by asking questions, we naturally improve our emotional intelligence, which in turn makes us better questioners.”

In her research, Wood Brooks has identified four basic types of questions:

- Introductory questions: “How are you?”
- Mirror questions: “I'm fine. How are you?”
- Full switch questions: Ones that change the topic entirely.
- Follow up questions: These types of questions are very powerful says Wood Brooks, “They signal to your conversation partner that you are listening, care, and want to know more. People interacting with a partner who asks lots of follow-up questions tend to feel respected and heard.”

In his own work, trainer and consultant Jim Dawson has also seen the power of the follow-up question. “When you ask follow-up questions and show that you have been listening attentively,” says Dawson, “others will believe that you are treating them with a level of integrity that they need to give you honest answers — and your relationships with customers, coworkers, and managers will strengthen and grow as a result.”

Dawson suggests that there are three specific times when reps should focus on asking more questions, both of themselves and of others.

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## #1: Ask questions to avoid misunderstandings

“Have you ever tried to respond to a request from a customer, a coworker, or a manager only to realize that you didn’t have all the information that you needed?” asks Dawson. “Perhaps during the initial interaction you were distracted or focused on something else. You can avoid this sort of attention gap by taking a moment to stop and ask questions to give yourself accurate information and a clear understanding of the circumstances of the request.”

Dawson adds that you should also make a habit of repeating your understanding of the problem or request to ensure that you have agreement about what needs to be done and to confirm that you have all of the information that you need.

One common problem that gets in the way of asking questions is making assumptions. Whether with customers or coworkers, that’s a mistake, says Dawson.

“Don’t make assumptions or jump to conclusions that in the end might not be correct,” he says. “Have the patience to ask one question at a time to get to the information that you need rather than using a shorthand. Remember that while you may have heard this issue or complaint 10 times already, for the customer, this is the first time, and taking the effort to ask questions is important to build a bridge to that customer.”

**“If you do not know how to ask the right question, you discover nothing.”**

— W. Edwards Deming

### Service Note

## Train yourself to ask questions

Here’s a simple exercise that trainer Jim Dawson suggests trying with a coworker to improve both your listening skills and your questioning skills.

“This is an improvisational exercise that you can do with two people,” Dawson says. “One person starts by asking the other person a question. It could be any question, but it might help to keep the questions work-related to begin with, or start with a question that a customer might ask. Then the other person has to respond with a question that is built on or related to the first question. Continue asking questions of one another until one person or the other misses. Then start over again.”

Dawson notes that this is, “an excellent, fun exercise that will teach you very quickly how difficult it is to listen carefully and to ask questions.”

## #2 Ask questions for self improvement

Questioning how you and your team do things is a valuable tool for improvement.

After difficult customer calls take a moment to ask yourself, “What went well?” Then ask yourself, “If I had a chance to take this call again, what would I have done differently?”

Dawson is quick to point out that you aren’t asking what was right or wrong about the call — it’s not about being judgmental. “It’s about how we can strengthen our performance, so the question is, ‘What would I have done differently?’” he says.

Questions can also spark new understanding and insights. For instance, when a coworker does something in a new or unique way, it’s easy to assume that it’s wrong. Dawson suggests that this is the time to ask yourself what

the reason might be. “The answer may open your eyes to a new perspective,” says Dawson.

## #3 Ask questions to resolve problems

Angry or upset customers are often unable to communicate clearly. By asking questions you can uncover the cause of a customer’s dissatisfaction and demonstrate your level of empathy.

“Never try to solve a customer problem or handle an angry customer without first questioning to discover what the problem or issue really is and making sure that the problem is clearly understood by everyone involved in finding the solution,” says Dawson. “Asking questions will help you form a strategy to take control of the situation.”

“By asking questions like, ‘What makes you say that?’ and, ‘What can we do to resolve this?’ and by listening to the answers with an open mind, you will set the stage for finding a solution,” says Dawson. “And equally important, you will maintain better control of the call.” **TCC**

## A monthly roundup ...

### Reps are busier than ever

New survey data reveals that customer service organizations are playing a vital role during the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey of 150 e-commerce companies found that customer service teams are seeing a 17% increase in inquiries overall — phone inquiries are up 34%, email inquiries are up 28%, and web inquiries are up 24%.  
*kustomer.com*

### Augmented reality in customer service

At Van Dyke Recycling Solutions in Norwalk, CT, customer support is conducted primarily over the phone. Expert technicians are on staff to answer questions and help customers trouble-shoot problems with complex recycling equipment. Now, an augmented reality device is helping improve customer service. Customers wear a special headset which allows staff at the Van Dyk service desk to speak with the customer and to see what the customer sees in real time.  
*vdrs.com/support*

### Consumers want to talk

Nearly 38% of recent survey respondents said that one of the keys to a positive customer service interaction is the opportunity to speak with a live representative. In addition 44% of respondents said they wanted companies to be more open about how to get in touch with a live rep. More than 1,000 consumers participated in the survey conducted by CGS an outsourcing company.  
*cgsinc.com*

## Ask the Panel

# How can I build rapport with customers?

*When people have a solid rapport, communication flows easily and productively and friction is avoided. Here are insights on building rapport from the panel.*

*Editor's Note: Our regular panel is extremely busy right now supporting customers during the pandemic. We hope to have them back shortly. In the meantime, we are providing an archive Ask the Panel column this month.*

### Begin at the beginning

You start building rapport as soon as you pick up the phone. Let your tone of voice and words invite the customer in. Be warm and sincere. Show that you love what you do and are happy to help in any way you can. Be genuine though — customers will always be able to sense when someone is faking it.

Once the customer is comfortable with you, they will start talking more and sharing more of what they need or want. Once they start talking, focus on what they are saying and be very careful not to interrupt.  
*Crystal Collins*

### Treat customers with respect

Consistently offering professional, courteous, and genuinely empathetic service is one way you can impact the level of respect and trust that is necessary to build rapport.

Acting professionally means being consistent and efficient while completing tasks, being reliable and competent when communicating with internal and external customers, and working with integrity and honesty to ensure you stay committed to your company's mission.  
*Megann Wither*

### Focus on the present

The easiest way to build rapport with customers is to listen carefully to what they are saying and to ask appropriate questions. Don't think that you probably won't talk to this customer again. Think of them as the person you are talking to now, and take an interest in what they are saying to you. That you cared enough to ask about what they were trying to tell you makes them feel that they are important to you.  
*Jessica Perry*

### Let your personality shine through

Take a moment to connect on a more personal level by asking about things like the weather, local sports teams, or the change to daylight savings time. But try to keep your comments and questions closed-ended to maintain control of the call. If the customer gets sidetracked during your brief conversation you will need to steer them back to the reason for the call.

What it boils down to is that the representative should let his or her personality show throughout the call. If you treat the customer as your friend, they will open up and let you do your job. Your enthusiasm and desire to satisfy the caller will show in the service you are providing. Even if it is the only time you speak with this customer, they will gain confidence in your abilities.  
*Donna Harrison*

# Refreshers and quick tips ...

## BLUF and other rules for email

When you email a customer or coworker you want that email to be read and acted on. But with the volume of email flowing across the web it can be hard to get a customer's attention.

Ben Decker, CEO of Decker Communications, offers four no-nonsense steps to ensure that customers read your email:

**1. BLUF.** This well known communication acronym stands for Bottom Line Up Front. The idea is to place conclusions, recommendations, or necessary actions at the beginning of the text rather than burying them at the end.

**2. Share your personality.** Try writing like you speak so that people feel you are communicating directly with them on a personal level.

**3. Focus on the subject line.** Most people do not write meaningful subject lines says Decker. He recommends including any required action and the due date in the subject line. For example, "Your signature needed by May 1."

**4. Check for typos.** Your email is an extension of you and your organization, says Decker, take the extra time to make it shine.

## Developing empathy

How many times have you heard about the value of empathy in customer interactions? Probably a lot. And it's good advice.


Empathy is the ability to sense other people's emotions and to imagine what they may be thinking and feeling. Some people are naturally more empathetic than others, but researchers at Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkley suggest three ways that anyone can become more empathetic:

• **Practice active listening.** Active listening involves approaching a conversation with a genuine desire to understand the other person's feelings and perspective, without judgment or defensiveness.

• **Share in other people's joy.** Empathy is not just about commiserating; it can also be experienced in response to positive emotions like happiness and pride. Research suggests that empathy for positive events — such as expressing enthusiasm when someone shares good news — can be just as important for building personal and professional relationships as empathy for negative events.

• **Read fiction.** Reading a great work of literature — or watching a film or play — allows us to temporarily step out of our own lives and fully immerse ourselves in another person's experience. In fact, research suggests that fiction readers are better attuned to the social and emotional lives of others.

## Admit it

When you don't know the answer to a customer's problem, admit it. It is much better to say, "I don't know, but I'll find out," than to fumble with an answer. 



Heard on Twitter

@Hyken

The technical side of customer service is actually easy to teach, but that doesn't mean the customer will have a great experience. You also have to understand the human side of customer service. It's the combination of the two that is greater than the sum of the parts.


@brett\_arrington

They say it takes 12 good experiences to make up for 1 bad experience. The problem is you won't get 12 chances.

@ExplnV

Body language is important as businesses reopen. We need to have an open posture as people come in and make them feel welcome, especially as our faces are covered and handshakes are out.

@CompanyVoice

Always be genuine, the customer really can tell. 

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# SkillSharpeners

The manager's companion to *Customer Communicator*

June 2020

## June Debriefing

The lead article in this month's issue of *Customer Communicator* focuses on the power of asking questions. Well-timed questions can help communicators gather better information, they can lead to new perspectives and skills, and they can keep calls on track and productive.

The longest section of the article covers questioning to avoid misunderstandings. In a fast-paced workplace it can be tempting to make assumptions that may not be correct.

**Discussion:** Would anyone like to share an example of a time when a logical assumption turned about to be all wrong?

What questions would have helped avoid this misunderstanding?

Could paraphrasing the customer's request have helped avoid misunderstanding?

(Be prepared with your own examples.)

There is also a related small item on page 4, which is titled, "Admit it" This relates to the main article on questioning in an important way. Service experts agree that when reps don't know the answer to a customer's question or problem, they should admit it, but assure the customer that they will find the answer. When you do this, you are telling the truth and operating from a position of integrity. But you are also making a commitment to get an answer.

**Discussion:** What language do you use to tell customers, "I don't know, but I'll find out?"

How do customers respond to your admitting that you don't know?

In addition to discussion about specific articles, open-ended questions can spark discussion and lead to insights.

**Discussion:** Which article was most helpful this month?

Did you disagree with any of the advice offered in the issue?

**Activity:** Before we wrap up, let's have two volunteers try Dawson's exercise on page two.

# Keep your team connected, motivated, and learning

The *Customer Communicator* three-part service includes:

**Customer Communicator.** How-to articles, practical tips, and tested techniques engage frontline teams in ongoing service skills training and reinforcement. *Delivered monthly, for distribution to your team.*

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