



This Month in Customer Service

Get organized!

January is Get Organized month, according to the National Association of Professional Organizers (NAPO), and that makes it the perfect time to put your priorities in order and to take on those tasks that perhaps you have been putting off. Here are some suggestions to get you going:

- **Make your goals/tasks a part of your regular routine.** Set a specific time each day to work on them and stick to it.
- **Concentrate on finishing a little bit or piece of your task or project at each sitting.** Try to get yourself out of the all-or-nothing frame of mind.
- **Find a coworker who tends to put off the same or similar tasks.** Make an appointment to work on your respective tasks together.
- **Take a good look at your workstation.** Is it conducive to your work? Make sure that you have the tools and resources you need, and that your workspace is efficiently organized.



For more that you can do to organize your workday, go to www.CustomerServiceGroup.com and click on "Web Extras."

Are you prepared for these customer service trends?

Five leading service experts share their insights into the coming changes in customer service and the role of the customer service professional.

To help our readers prepare for the future, *Customer Communicator* asked a number of our regular contributors for their thoughts on what to expect in 2017, and beyond. They acknowledged the ongoing move toward more technology in the service center. But they remind us that this must be accompanied by the interpersonal skills that make each customer feel valued.

Following is their advice for the New Year:

Keep expanding those service skills

According to Richard S. Gallagher of the Point of Contact Group, one of the big trends in customer service today is multi-channel support. "Customers have many ways of contacting you and hearing from you — from the telephone to mobile devices and social media," Gallagher says, "so that means that in 2017 customer service reps will need more than just conversations skills — they will need to know how to efficiently respond to online chats, tweets, and online community support forums."

Reps will also have to learn to be not just good, but fast, in 2017. "We live in a world of 24/7 information on demand, and agents are often managing multiple customers at once via live chat or social media," Gallagher says, "and learning to use databases and automation tools to respond quickly is part of the skill set for being a 21st century service professional."

Balance empathy and problem-solving

With the greater emphasis on alternative customer channels, expanded databases, and customer analytics at many companies, customer service training can sometimes focus on these technical issues and skills, and this often pushes soft-skills training to the back of the line, says Barbara Burke, author of *The Monkey, the Moon, & Maybe*.

But the truth is that while problem-solving and reducing customer effort are important service goals, customer satisfaction is still based largely on how much — or how little — the service rep makes the customer feel valued. "So

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while the customer service rep of the future not only has to get the job done, fix the problem so that it stays fixed, control the call, navigate toward a solution, offer customers options, and educate the customer on how to avoid similar problems in the future — reps also have to make sure that they connect with the customer on an emotional level and make the customer feel valued,” Burke says.

Be a mentor to customers

Chip R. Bell, consultant and author of *Sprinkles: Creating Awesome Experiences Through Innovative Service*, agrees with Burke: “Yes, customer service needs to be effortless for the customer. Reps should be skilled in providing service that is simple and straightforward — that doesn’t involve going through a lot of hoops — but it also needs to be emotionally comfortable.” And he adds, “Customers need to feel that they are valued partners in a business interaction, and not just a consumer.”

Reps need to know how to integrate with the high-tech and self-service options that are available to customers at many companies, “but at the end of the day,” Bell says, “it’s about a relationship, it is not about a functional interconnection. And the reps in contact centers have the opportunity to create an emotional connection with customers that is upbeat, and fun and different, and highly animated — and not just going through the motions while looking at a time clock.”

One way that reps can make customers feel valued is to see themselves more as mentors to customers than as strictly service providers. “Reps frequently have an opportunity to help customers learn more about their company’s products and services, to provide short-cuts, to offer stats, to provide online instruction, and to ask questions like, ‘Have you tried this?’”

Become a service specialist

John Goodman of Customer Care Management & Consulting suggests that one coming trend in customer service is that many companies are establishing different skill levels or specialties within the service organization to be better able to handle customer problems and issues as they arise. This might involve service tiers or certifying reps for different skills or for their ability to handle certain types of problems.

For the service rep, this might present a challenge, but it also provides a clearer avenue of advancement within the service center — and the organization. “So you might become the subject matter expert for this or that, or get certification in different areas,” Goodman says.

Goodman also suggests that reps need to become more involved in providing feedback to management for continuous improvement efforts in customer service, even as automation and self-service become a bigger part of the process. “A part of the rep’s job is to be listening, and continuously asking, ‘Why am I getting this call?’”

Obviously, the more a rep knows about the company’s products, processes, procedures, and internal data and resources, the better prepared he or she will be to identify these problems and to suggest ways to fix them.

Add a personal touch

Shep Hyken, author of *Amaze Every Customer Every Time*, says that there are a number of trends that customer service reps should be aware of. “Number one is that the phone is being used less and less as alternative channels and self-service are popping up and becoming very popular,” he says. And the second, but related, thing is that reps need to learn properly how to deal with customers via text, whatever the channel.

Along with that trend comes the need to be able to respond more quickly to customers’ text messages. Hyken reports that a couple of his clients have a goal of responding within 15 minutes to any customer who engages them on any social channel, or by any written or text format.

Hyken also notes that, in today’s support centers, reps are often picking up conversations that were started by a virtual

agent or chat-bot. The analytics are getting so good that the automated channel knows when it’s time to pass the customer to a live agent. But when that happens, “the live agent has to have access to the entire customer file, and all of the interactions that have taken place with that customer,” he says, “because otherwise they are going to be stepping in and asking the customer to repeat themselves. And that’s not cool.”

So, artificial intelligence (AI) is helping customer service centers a lot, but there is still a need for what Hyken calls “intelligent assistance” (IA), which is where the rep comes in. And that intelligent assistant needs to be able to provide the empathy and personalization that might be missing from automated encounters. And to do this, he says, “Reps need to have and know how to use all of the tools and information that are needed to give the customer a personalized experience.” **TCC**

A monthly roundup ...

Customer feedback is critical

According to Richard R. Shapiro of The Center for Client Retention, there are a growing number of ways to measure Customer Sat, but the only way to understand the numbers will be to dig deep into your customer feedback. He adds that many companies are expanding customer feedback options by using multi-channel feedback to create more viable “snapshots” of customer concerns.

www.tcfc.com

Did you meet your 2016 goals?

Before setting goals for 2017, take a moment to assess the progress you made in 2016, says performance coach Erica Peitler. Here are three questions to ask yourself: 1) Did you successfully achieve your priority goals for this past year? 2) Did you apply your skills in real situations? 3) Did you invest sufficient time and energy into your learning to accelerate your career progression?

www.ericapeitler.com

Have an attitude of gratitude

You can get past the dark moments in customer service, says Alan Zimmerman, a communication consultant, by recognizing the good things that are happening in your life; appreciating everything; phrasing things positively; verbalizing your thanks to others; and personalizing those thanks to others by using that person's name.

www.drzimmerman.com

Ask the Panel

What goals have you set for yourself for 2017?

The new year is a time for reps to look ahead and to think about what they would like to accomplish.

Get back to the basics

For 2017 I plan to get back to the basics. The foundation of customer service has always been in the connection you make with every person you talk to. Even though a lot of situations are similar, each person is going to see it in a different way and I want to really see and understand those differences. It's the individuality in the way that you treat everyone that makes it all come together and I know I can do better. This is a goal that will assist me not only professionally but personally.

*Rachel Dillon,
Assurant Specialty Property*

Develop my strengths

Professionally, my goal is to focus on developing my strengths. In the past I've held myself back by only worrying about what I perceived to be my weaknesses, but in my opinion, this approach wasn't the most effective way to enhance my development. Since the weaknesses that I have do not affect my performance as negatively as my strengths could enhance my performance positively, spending more time on the latter becomes crucial to my overall development. Specific strengths I intend to focus on in 2017 are my leadership abilities and project management skills. I'm confident this approach will help set me apart, while making me a greater asset to my employer.

*Jerrard Gates,
Navy Federal Credit Union*

Develop a new perspective

In 2017, I am focusing on three types of goals, personally and professionally: Development, Operational Status, and Effectiveness.

For Development: I will continue to meet with my team members and my management team regularly to ensure that we discuss a career trajectory and create a method of action.

For Operational Status: I am encouraging my team to provide insight into where we could meet our organization's goals by maximizing resources and reducing customer effort.

For Effectiveness: A very wise manager once told me, regarding leadership, "There is no right or wrong, only effective or ineffective." In 2017, I am pledging to be more proactive.

*Megann Wither,
Navy Federal Credit Union*

Learn and develop

When I set goals, I don't just set one large goal. I break it down into more manageable mini-goals. For example, if I want a promotion, then I set a goal to find out all that I can about that position. Then I take the necessary steps to see if I would be a good fit for the position, with my education and job skills. Then I would submit the paperwork to have an interview for the position if I still felt it would be a good fit.

*Jo Sprowl,
SKF USA Inc.*



Read more from the panelists at www.CustomerServiceGroup.com/answers.php.

Refreshers, quick tips, and quotes ...

Take ownership of customer problems

When a customer calls with a problem or issue that needs to be fixed, don't just pass it off — take ownership of the situation. This will help to ease the customer's anxiety and demonstrate that you take their issues seriously.

If you can't resolve the issue on the spot, tell the customer exactly what you intend to do and give a reasonable time frame for getting back in touch with them. Then, keep the customer informed of your progress with continuous updates until the issue is resolved to his or her satisfaction.

Tips for handling a difficult or angry customer

David Kahle, a sales consultant, has dealt with his share of angry and difficult customers, and here are his recommendations for dealing with them successfully:

- **Don't take it personally.** The customer is probably not angry with you. And if you react in kind, the situation is only going to get worse.
- **Listen.** "When you sincerely and actively listen, that calms the customer down and shows that you are interested," Kahle says.
- **Empathize.** How would you feel if you were the customer and this had happened to you? When you let the customer know you understand how he feels, you release some of the tension from the situation.
- **Apologize.** Even if you can't accept responsibility, you can let the customer know that you are sorry that this happened to him.

- **Don't blame.** The customer is less concerned with who is at fault than what can be done about the situation.

- **Ask.** Always ask for something from the customer — i.e., more details, or how the customer would like to see the issue resolved. This shows the customer that you really do want to understand.

- **Don't make promises you can't keep.** This only adds to the difficulty.

- **Deliver more.** Whatever you promise, or however you resolve the situation, add a little extra if you can as a way to leave the customer feeling good about the encounter.

- **Follow up.** This is a great way to leave the customer with the positive impression that you care.

January is the time to rethink your team effort

This is especially important for customer service teams. Business coach Ernest Oriente says that regular regrouping and reorienting "is an opportunity to end a business cycle, recap your performance, and outline a plan of success for the coming year."

At your next team meeting, he suggests, review your team goals and objectives from the previous year. Then address any problems experienced in the course of the year, as well as any upcoming issues that might have an impact on team performance. Finally, map out a calendar of activities to help you meet your new objectives. And make sure that you take detailed notes and follow up with a memo to each team member recapping the discussion and including a to-do list. **TCC**



Heard on Twitter

@toister

Key social media customer service skills: 1. Brand awareness 2. Focused written communicator 3. Reading comprehension 4. Empathy 5. Swift.

@ChipRBell

Customers are more likely to remember how you treated them long after they have forgotten what you did for them.

@RichardRShapiro

Be the customer's guide, a source of direction that will help solve their problem or obtain their wish.

@MarshaCollier

"I'd rather regret the things I've done, than regret the things I haven't done." — Lucille Ball

@johnrpatt

76% of customers say that the level of customer service is the true test of how much an organization values them. **TCC**

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— Abraham Lincoln

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