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Practical tactics for the frontline customer service professional

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This Month in Customer Service

Get your voice in sync

Synchronizing your voice to the voice of the customer is one way of building rapport, says Nicholas Boothman, author of *Convince Them in 90 Seconds*.

“Synchronizing builds rapport by subtly sending the message ‘I am with you. I’m on the same page now,’” he says. “Nothing drives a fast talker around the bend faster than a slow talker. And nothing unhinges a quiet talker more than a loud voice,” Boothman says. Avoid those obstacles to rapport by trying to match your vocal characteristics — speed, pitch (the highs and lows), tone, and volume — with those of the customer.

To improve your synchronization skills, Boothman suggests this exercise: “For one day, try matching the volume, speed, tone, and pitch of the people you talk to through the day. Don’t go over the top. Just do as little or as much as you need to adjust yourself to their speech characteristics.” **TCC**

Understanding the value of delivering great customer service

There are benefits for your customers, your organization, and you!

Every now and then, it’s useful to step back and remember why delivering great customer service is so important. It’s probably something that you talked about a lot during onboarding, but the big picture often gets overlooked in the details of daily work.

Here are some of the many reasons why delivering good customer service is important:

- It adds value to your product or service
- It reduces time consuming and costly repeat requests
- It increases customer retention and revenue
- It results in positive reviews
- It builds customer trust and loyalty
- It sets you apart from your competition
- It makes it easy for customers to do business with you
- It encourages word-of-mouth marketing.

There’s one more item to add to that list, which is often overlooked: Providing good customer service is good for frontline service providers.

It just makes sense. When customer interactions are friendly, productive, and frictionless, both the customer and the rep leave the interaction with a positive attitude. On the other hand, poor customer interactions can lead to high levels of stress and emotional burnout for reps.

An international team of researchers actually go a step further and report that providing excellent customer service is “therapeutic” for reps.

The researchers worked with 1,200 customers and reps in three countries. The results show that both giving and receiving good customer service was perceived as pleasant and associated with positive feelings for customers and reps. In fact, the results showed that those positive feelings actually carried over to future interactions and protected reps against nega-

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tive and damaging emotions from difficult interactions.

It's a positive feed back loop that benefits customers and service providers.

Keeping the feedback loop strong

JoAnna Brandi, a leading customer service trainer and coach, says there are five essential actions that every service rep can take to ensure that they are delivering great service that benefits their customers and themselves. Interestingly, none of the actions is concerned with the mechanics of the job, they are all concerned with attitudes toward the job.

Action 1. Be fully present in the job. Being present in your work means being open and attentive to opportunities and challenges. "You never know who is going to be on the other end of the call," Brandi says. "It could be the most pleasant person in the world who is going to brighten your day with their sense of humor, or it could be someone who is having a bad day and who gives you the opportunity to practice your communication skills."

In either case, being present means that you are dealing only with what is in front of

you — that customer and that issue — and not thinking about anything else."

Action 2. Develop a learning attitude. One way to support the goal of being present in the job is to develop a learning attitude toward your work. "Make it a goal to learn something new every day — whether it is from a customer, a manager, or a colleague — and make it your practice at the end of each day or each week to write down the things that you learned," Brandi says.

Action 3. Be proud of what you do. "Customer service reps play an important part in the success of their organizations," Brandi says. "Even if parts of the process are broken — if the wait times are long, or if the website is confusing — a great experience with a customer service rep can make the difference in whether that customer stays a customer and keeps coming back. And that's something to be proud of."

Action 4. Develop your emotional intelligence. Customers have two basic needs: their rational or "hard" needs, or

what it is that they want to buy, or report, or verify, or fix; and their emotional or "soft" needs — the need to feel appreciated, valued, special, secure, or confident that their issue has been resolved.

The ability to recognize and respond to these emotional needs is "emotional intelligence," and Brandi says that you can develop this like any other skill.

Brandi recommends starting by observing and identifying the words, phrases, attitudes, tones, or other triggers that might set off a negative reaction — in yourself, or in the customer.

If a customer pushes your buttons, for example, and you observe yourself saying something negative and allowing those negative feelings to affect your next few customer calls, you might want to work back through the situation to really understand what the trigger was and how you might have reacted more positively. For example, "I could have taken a deep breath and counted to five." Or 'I could have remembered that the customer is not really angry with me, but with the situation.' Or 'I could have used these positive phrases to calm myself and the customer.'" **TCC**

Pop Quiz

Test your knowledge of customer service with this month's pop quiz. Answer each statement true or false. Turn to page 4 to check your answers.

		True	False
1.	Providing good customer service is good for customers and for reps.		
2.	There are eight benefits of providing good customer service.		
3.	Either you have emotional intelligence or you don't.		

A monthly roundup ...

Recognizing the "human-centered" contact center

Research and advisory firm Forrester is once again reporting that service delivered by human agents (not robots) is what drives positive customer outcomes. "The pendulum is finally swinging back," says the firm, "from hyper-automation to human-led conversation." In looking ahead, the firm notes that the service industry has got some work to do. "Organizations must embark on a journey to change the culture of their contact centers," says Forrester. *Forrester.com*

What matters to management?

To uncover the latest trends in customer care, global consulting firm McKinsey surveyed industry leaders and experts. The results show that customer care leaders are focused on improving the customer experience, reducing contact volumes, implementing artificial intelligence, and increasing revenue generation during service calls.

Patience is a skill

"If patience is not on the top of your list of customer service skills, then it should be," says Gregory Ciotti in a recent blog post. "Patience is important to customers, who often reach out when they are confused and frustrated," he says. "If you deal with customers on a daily basis, be sure to stay patient when they come to you stumped and frustrated, and take the time to truly figure out what they want." *www.helpscout.net*

Ask the Experts

I dread questions that I can't answer. What's the solution?

We're a large government agency and there's a lot to know. Even with a good knowledge base and a lot of post-it notes, I sometimes don't have an answer to a customer's question. What's the best way to handle this?

Understand the question

"Some people are long winded and wordy. They may frame a question in a confusing way, leaving you to think you don't know how to answer it, or even worse, that you don't have the faintest idea what they're talking about. Don't immediately resort to a panic response. Instead, gently get to the root of the question, by asking your own questions," says Evie Cooper a help desk associate. "Often a few quick clarifying questions will help you understand the problem so that you can provide a solution."

"Another useful way to clarify the question is to rephrase it. After the customer asks the question, try repeating it back in your own words," says Cooper. "This would sound like, 'If I understood you correctly, you would like help with....' or 'Just to be sure we're on the same page, you are asking....' Once you're sure of the question, you can move forward to find the answer."

When you just don't know

"It's impossible to know the answer to every question, so don't be too hard on yourself," says Jon Marks, a senior service rep.

When you don't have an answer, you basically have two options, says Marks: transfer to a specialist or research the issue. I use the following language in these situations:

"Unfortunately, that falls outside of my scope of knowledge, may I connect you with an expert in that area?"

"I don't know the best solution, but John Jones on our IT team will be able to suggest some alternatives. He is very helpful. May I connect you to John?"

"I'm not familiar with that function, but I am happy to research your question and get back to you."

"I've never been asked that before. I'd like to check with a coworker. May I call you back this afternoon? What time is best for you?"

"If you use every 'I don't know' as an opportunity to research the question and find the answer, you'll be in a much stronger place."

Share, share, share

"We all like to see ourselves as knowledgeable and competent, so it can throw you for a loop when a customer asks a question and you draw a blank. No matter how much information you have available, sometimes the best thing to do is talk to the folks on your team," says rep Jen Ehrlich. "When we discuss questions and solutions as a team, everyone can share their knowledge and we all benefit."



Ask the panel. Have a question or comment you'd like to share with the panel? Just email info@CustomerServiceGroup.com. Please use the subject "Ask the Panel."

Refreshers and quick tips ...

Fine tuning your voice

"Your voice tone can make or break a call," says Eric Davis, director of operations for Beryl Companies. "Proper voice tone conveys interest and energy. A flat voice tone, on the other hand, tells the caller that you aren't interested." But beware says Davis, "The goal is not to sound like a game-show host. The goal is to let your natural voice speak for you to express your interest."

Increase your comfort at work, enjoy the benefits all day

Now that you've moved back to the office, do you find yourself arriving home with a stiff neck and an aching back? In some cases, a few simple changes in your work habits can help you feel more comfortable. For example:

- If you use a single monitor, position it directly in front of you and so that the top of the screen is positioned slightly below eye level. If you use two monitors, place the one you use most often in front of you as if it were a single monitor, place the second monitor on one side and at a slight angle. If you use both monitors equally, place them side-by-side directly in front of you and then angle them to create a semi-circle.

- Try to keep your shoulders relaxed, without slouching, and your neck in a neutral position, not bent up or down beyond a 15-degree angle.

- When using a keyboard, keep your elbows close to your sides, and not bent less than 90 degrees. Your keyboard should be positioned so that your wrists can

remain flat (not bent up, down, or moving from side to side) or slightly below elbow level while keying. Also, try to use minimal force in your keying.

- Make sure your feet are well-supported on the floor, with your knees bent no more than 90 degrees. Adjust your seat back so that the front edge of your seat cushion is two to three inches from the back of the knees.

Dealing with departmental conflict

When you can't resolve a conflict on your own, you may need to seek the help of a supervisor or manager. In this situation, Diane Katz, an organizational consultant, recommends being a problem solver rather than just a complainer.

"What you don't want to say is, 'I am working so hard, and Gail or Alice isn't pulling her weight, isn't working as hard, or whatever.' That's when you become someone who complains and you are not going to be perceived as a problem solver," Katz says.

"Instead, you should say something like, 'There are some things going on with the team and I think we could function much better if we do this...' or 'You know, I have some thoughts on how the team can function better.' That way you come across as a problem solver."

Find a way to agree

Successfully resolving a customer's complaint often depends on identifying, expressing, and building on points of agreement.

Just find one point on which you can agree, and say so. Here are some examples:

- "I agree, seven weeks should have been enough time."
- "You're right. That doesn't sound like very good service. Let's see how we can correct that."
- "It's really frustrating when that happens." **ITCC**

Pop Quiz Answers

1. **True.** Both giving and receiving good customer service is associated with positive feelings.
2. **False.** There are many more. Some are universal, others are unique to specific areas such as health care, government services, and education.
3. **False.** You can improve emotional intelligence by observing how you react to other people and how they react to you.

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SkillSharpeners

The manager's companion to *Customer Communicator*

August 2022

August's highlights

In this month's issue of *Customer Communicator*, your team will find:

1. An interesting article on the benefits of great service — for your organization, your customers, and even your reps.
2. Advice on what to do when you're stumped by a customer's question.
3. Customer service news, tips for reducing back and neck strain, the pop quiz, and more.

Manager's Notes

This month's "Ask the Experts" column addresses how to handle the difficult and uncomfortable situation that occurs when reps are unable to answer a customer's question. One of the problems that many service teams face is institutional, hidden, or historic knowledge: Undocumented information that only certain people on the team know. And it refers specifically to knowledge that many people should have in order to serve customers well.

Many service teams rely on a knowledge management tool that is used to document, update, and store their institutional knowledge. And because it's all in one place, the rest of the team can use the knowledge, too.

The summer months (hopefully they're a little slower for you) are a good time to identify and document institutional knowledge. One way to proceed is to ask individual reps to review sections of your existing documentation. Simply ask them, "Is this complete and current?" In many cases they'll say that something is out of date.

As you capture institutional knowledge, start rolling it out to your team right away. After all, it doesn't help anyone if no one knows the documentation has been updated.