



Tools, tips and tactics for the frontline customer service professional

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Take Four

## Make the most of video meetings

It's easy to appear disinterested, or even bored, during video meetings. To demonstrate a high level of engagement, follow these four quick tips:

**1. Sit up straight.** You wouldn't slouch during an in-person meeting so maintain good posture through the entire video call.

**2. Make eye contact.** The easiest way to show that you are engaged with someone is through eye contact. On a video call, you do this simply by looking directly at the camera whenever possible.

**3. Get physical.** Nod, smile, gesture, give a thumbs up. Use all of the non-verbal cues available to show your reaction to what is being said.

**4. Stay focused.** It's easy to get distracted by your phone or email while on a video call. Try to resist the temptation, others on the call will notice when you look down or look away. **TCC**

## What should you do when a coworker mishandles a customer call?

**It's a situation that requires skill and tact to maintain a positive relationship with both customer and coworker.**

It's happened to every frontline rep: A coworker fails to resolve a problem to the customer's satisfaction or was perceived as treating the customer indifferently or unprofessionally. Now, the customer is complaining to you about it.

Your first reaction may be to defend your coworker or to agree with the customer. But there's a better way, says Kate Nasser, the People Skills Coach:

### What to say to the customer

The number one rule for dealing with a customer whose issue has been mishandled or who has a complaint about another rep is "don't throw your team member under the bus, and don't defend your team member," says Nasser.

There is often a gut reaction to defend your team member, even subtly, by saying something like, "I'm surprised that happened. She is usually very thorough." But then the customer is hearing you tell them that they are wrong, and that might just escalate the problem.

Instead, says Nasser, "the best thing to say is, 'We really value your feedback. And I have written this down.' And then say, 'What else can I do right now to make sure that your initial customer service issue is resolved?'"

She adds: "The basic formula is to affirm that the customer's opinion matters — because it does. You don't defend your teammate, but you also don't tell the customer that they are wrong."

Often, customer service reps will want to skip over what's said about their teammate, by saying simply, "Well, how can I help you resolve the problem?" But that is not good, Nasser says, because the customer is looking for empathy and they need to be told that their feedback matters.

"Acknowledge, don't encourage," she adds. Let the customer know that you value their feedback, but don't encourage them to go on a rant about how they feel they were treated — or mistreated.

**Take a time-out for clarification**

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Nasser also suggests that if your company allows you to offer the customer a small compensation of some sort — a discount, a coupon, or something like that — this would be the time to offer it, along with the comment that, “I am very sorry that you were treated this way.”

What to say to your coworker

Correcting a coworker requires a great deal of tact.

You may have to approach the coworker to get information or background to resolve the customer’s outstanding issue. When this happens, Nasser says it is best to, “stay focused on solving the customer’s problem, and don’t mention that the customer is complaining about the coworker.”

Afterwards, you should follow your department’s protocol, if it has one, for how to pass on customer complaints about coworkers.

When you do approach a coworker about a complaint from a customer, you don’t want to start the conversation by saying, “Hey, I just spoke to a customer who said this and this about you.” That can be kind of rough to hear without warning, Nasser says.

Instead, approach the coworker at a quiet moment and say, “Are you open to hearing some

Service Note

Take a time-out for clarification

Every now and then you’ll hear a coworker make a mistake on a customer call. They might be providing incorrect information, not following a standard procedure, over promising, or one of a hundred other things. So what are you going to do?

This issue came up at Varitronics Inc. an education technology company. Reps work in close quarters so they can easily overhear each other. The team agreed that if anyone heard a coworker providing incorrect information they would make the “time out” or “T sign” with their hands. The rep on the call then has the option of interrupting the call for clarification, or calling the customer back with updated information.

customer feedback right now?” That way, you give the coworker a chance to prepare himself or herself — or to defer the conversation until a more appropriate time.

Be specific with the details

When the coworker is ready to talk, you can say, “This customer just called me about an interaction they had with you. The issue wasn’t resolved to their satisfaction, and they also said that when you said XYZ, it offended them.”

Nasser warns that it is important to be specific about what the customer said, how they thought they were handled, and what

offended them. Specifics are going to be much more helpful in terms of correcting and improving someone’s behavior than generalities will be.

At the end of the conversation with your coworker, don’t make a statement like, “I hope you found this feedback valuable,” because that is what Nasser calls a “pressure statement.” Instead, it’s better to say something like, “How do you feel about this?” or “Did you find this feedback helpful?” That gives the other rep the chance to remember that this was feedback from the customer and that you are not attacking them. That should also help to ensure that your relationship is not damaged by the conversation. **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.	If a customer complains to you about a coworker, it’s best to leave the past in the past and simply ask how you can help the customer now.		
2.	As part of a service team, it’s important to stand up for a coworker if a customer complains or criticizes them.		
3.	If you discover that a coworker has given a customer incorrect information or mishandled a call, follow your department’s protocol.		

## A monthly roundup ...

### AI helps reps

With nearly 20 million products to support, online retailer Wayfair, has turned to artificial intelligence (AI) for help.

When serving customers via chat and email the company uses AI to help reps gather information quickly.

Wayfair CEO Niraj Shah explains: "You can use an AI model to basically take in the question from the customer, craft a response that it thinks is ideal, then show the agent a draft of the response — that agent can then change or edit it."

Wayfair.com

### Customers want to connect with real people

Yet another survey finds that customers are frustrated by the inability to talk to a live person. Fifty-three percent of participants in a study by Coveo cited this as the most frustrating part of the customer experience.

The study also asked which types of organizations provide the worst service. Thirty-six percent said the retail industry was worst, followed by utilities, health insurance, technology providers, and the hospitality/travel industry.

Coveo.com

### Ask the Experts

## How do you define customer service?

*"In all of my time working in customer service, no one has actually said what customer service is. I'm looking for a great definition, one that I can use to guide my work and my learning."*

### It starts with customers

The definition of the word "customer" provides important insights into the role of customer service in almost every organization.

Jill Griffin, author of *Customer Loyalty — How to Earn It, How to Keep It*, says that the word customer is derived from the root word custom. The word custom is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as meaning "to render a thing customary or usual" and "to practice habitually."

"A customer is a person who becomes accustomed to doing business with you," Griffin says. "This custom is established through purchases and interactions on frequent occasions over a period of time. The goal of customer service is to develop and nurture customers rather than simply attracting buyers."

### It has a lifecycle

"Customer service is the support you offer your customers from the moment they first contact your business to the months and years afterward," says Teresa Anania, SVP Global Customer Success, Renewals, and Customer Experience.

"Providing good customer service means being a reliable partner to your customers — it goes beyond helping them troubleshoot, use, and make informed decisions about


your product. The objective of customer service is to make the most of every interaction and develop long-term relationships with your customers."

### It changes over time

Modern customer service isn't the same thing it was 50, 20, or even 5 years ago — the definition is still evolving, according to the editorial team at HelpScout, a customer service systems provider.

Customer service as a specialty is coming into its own, offering companies a competitive advantage that's difficult to copy, say the editors. That brings us to their definition:

"We define modern customer service as the act of providing timely, empathetic help that keeps customers' needs at the forefront of every interaction. Instead of the stereotypical view of customer service as a cost center, customer support teams are the face of the company. They play a critical part in sales and word-of-mouth marketing, work side-by-side with product teams, and have a seat at the table when it comes to company decision making."

 **Ask the experts.** Have a question or comment you'd like to share? Just email [info@CustomerServiceGroup.com](mailto:info@CustomerServiceGroup.com). Please use the subject "Ask the Experts."

# Refreshers and quick tips ...

## Good news

A 14-year-old office plant in England has grown to over 600 feet: [fills office with good vibes](#).

The U.S. government is giving away a few lighthouses for free. How's that for a [remote office](#)?

A ring found in a wastewater treatment plant was [returned to its owner](#).

## Relieve stress and unleash creativity

In recent years, adults have embraced coloring as a creative way to relax and unwind from everyday stress.

"Coloring definitely has therapeutic potential to reduce anxiety, create focus, or bring [about] more mindfulness," says Marygrace Berberian, Program Coordinator for the Graduate Art Therapy Program at NYU.

## Do you have an "Aloha attitude"?

A visit to Hawaii convinced marketing professional Asma Stephan that having a positive attitude and being upbeat with customers could improve a lot of customer interactions. "Within a few days, I started to wonder if Hawaii was in the middle of a smiling contest. I'm not saying that everything is rainbows and sprinkles all the time — but positivity permeated the island," she says.

A warm hello and a friendly smile made her feel welcome; people tried to connect with her personally; and service people seemed genuinely interested in

making sure that her experience was special.

The Aloha attitude isn't limited to Hawaii, says Stephan. "In fact, embodying this attitude when interacting with customers can give agents, service reps and anyone in the service industry an edge. Cultivating positivity, community, and an investment in your customers will certainly lead to more happy interactions."

## It's who you thank

"It's not who you know that will make you successful — it's who you thank," says networking guru Andrea Nierenberg in a blog post. "Say 'Thank you' to everyone. It is amazing what it can do for business and personal relationships. When we express our appreciation to clients, coworkers, and friends, their attitudes are positively affected, and positive attitudes impact business and personal success."

## Patience is a skill

If patience is not on the top of your list of important customer service skills, then it should be, says author Gregory Ciotti. "Patience is important to customers, who often reach out to service support 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."

## Be accessible to customers

A study by Avaya reports that the harder a customer has to work to get through to a customer representative or to the

right person to handle their issue, the less likely that customer is to come back, regardless of whether their issue was ultimately resolved satisfactorily. That inability to get directly to an agent generally wipes out the positive results of the interaction. **TCC**

## Pop Quiz Answers

1. **False.** When a customer complains about a coworker, give an empathy statement followed by a statement of appreciation for the feedback.
2. **False.** In this type of situation, defending a teammate diminishes the customer and may escalate the problem.
3. **True.** This can be a delicate situation, in many organizations, protocols are in place to make it easier for everyone involved.

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# SkillSharpeners

The manager's companion to *Customer Communicator*

August 2023

## August's highlights

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

1. Techniques for handling customers who complain about other reps.
2. An "Ask the Experts" column with three interesting takes on the question, "What is customer service?"
3. Customer service news, a moment of positivity, benefits of an "Aloha attitude," the pop quiz, and more.

### Manager's Notes

Handling customer complaints about other reps is an often over-looked issue in customer service training. But it's important says Kate Nasser, the People Skills Coach.

Nasser suggests that one of the best things an organization can do to minimize issues arising from reps having to handle complaints about other reps is to establish an agreed-upon protocol. This means discussing the types of issues and complaints that might come up and getting agreement on how they should be handled.

Some of the issues that you want to discuss with your group, for instance, include questions like: When a customer feels that someone on the team didn't treat them well, how are we going to deal with this? What are we going to do internally to learn from it? Is it OK to involve a manager? Is a team member going to think I ratted him out by reporting the issue? The overriding goal, says Nasser, "is to establish an agreement that negative criticism is important and that you can learn from it."

For some companies, the protocol might simply be to report the complaint to a supervisor or team leader and to let that person approach the rep. For others it might involve a QA team, a quality committee, or other oversight group. Whatever the case, it is important that reps know what the process or protocol is, and that they have had a chance to agree to it.

Nasser also shares that one of the ways in which some companies approach the issue of a customer complaint about a rep is to have a three-person discussion about the issue. This would include the team leader, the team member who received the complaint, and the team member that the complaint is about. "They sit and talk about the issue, discuss the details of the complaint, and talk about what they can learn from the situation," Nasser says.