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Journal for the frontline customer service professional

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Month in Customer Service

## Resolve to eliminate "toxic talk" in the New Year

It can be extremely difficult to remain positive in a negative setting. And when coworkers are complaining or bad-mouthing customers it creates not just a negative setting, but a "toxic environment." Resolve to keep your environment non-toxic with these tips:

- Don't start toxic talk. Even if you and other reps see negative talk as simply "blowing off steam," it can develop into a culture of negativity.
- Don't get caught up in toxic talk. When others engage in negative comments or complaints about customers, try to turn the conversation around. One way to do this is to brainstorm ways that the situation could have been handled differently.
- Don't ignore the situation. If toxic talk is becoming a regular practice in your workplace, you might have to have a discussion with your supervisor. Not to point fingers or name names, but to talk about how this makes it difficult to maintain a positive, customer-oriented culture. **TCC**

## Inflation shines spotlight on importance of customer service

**As inflation lingers and recession looms, consumer spending will become more purposeful, which means that customer service matters more than ever.**

A recent Ipsos poll finds that most customers are feeling the strain as inflation hits the highest rate in four decades.

As inflation rises and budgets tighten, service organizations of all types can expect to see an increase in demand for meaningful, personalized customer experiences.

Fortunately, there are steps that every frontline rep can take to meet those rising expectations.

### Remember the "little things"

Customers like to feel special and important — not simply one of many nameless accounts in a vast database. Making customers feel valued and significant often comes down to the "little things." It's the niceties that occur during a transaction that are remembered most often.

Here are nine ideas for "little things" that make each interaction a pleasant, satisfying, feel-good experience for customers. Some will apply to your specific service situation, others may not, and there are likely others that you've developed over the years for your own service environment.

**1. Welcome new customers.** Take extra time to greet new customers, welcome them to your company, and introduce the service options, product guidelines, policies, and processes that will impact them. Make sure they know how to get the most benefit from their products and services, and the best way to contact you or your department with questions.

**2. Express genuine interest in the customer.** Try to engage your customers so they feel like more than just a number. When possible, call customers by name, and spend a few moments, perhaps while waiting for a screen to load, building rapport through small talk about the weather or a shared connection.

**Take ownership of the customer's problem**

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**Ask the Experts: How to address customers**

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**"Let me speak to your manager"**


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### 3. Don't rush the customer.

Even if you have talk-time objectives to meet, you can make sure that customers don't feel rushed. Allow them the time they need to fully express their needs or concerns, probe for unspoken or follow-up issues, and demonstrate your empathy and intention to help.

**4. Take ownership of the customer's problem.** If there is a problem or issue to be resolved, taking ownership of the situation helps ease the customer's anxiety and demonstrates that you take their concerns seriously. If you can't resolve an 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 regular updates until the issue is resolved.

**5. Simplify the process for the customer.** Customers can be overwhelmed with all of the options for accessing customer support. Find out the customer's service preferences — do they prefer personal service with a live rep? Are they looking for fast transactions? Are they more comfortable helping themselves online or via the IVR system? Educate customers on all the available service



**Customers are more accepting of inflation and willing to pay more if they have a great customer experience.**

options to ensure they'll be served the way that they prefer.

**6. Keep your promises.** It's important to earn customers' trust — and not lose it. Never put yourself in a situation where you find yourself making excuses for missed deadlines or service failures. Make sure any promises you make are realistic and that you'll be able to follow through on them. If you can't get something done when the customer would like it, be honest — say so and promise to do your best.

**7. Offer the customer something new.** Let customers know about new products, services, or offers. During your conversation, listen for clues to how you can help make things easier for the customer. Is there a product or service your company offers that meets a need or desire?

**8. Show your appreciation.** Telling customers that you appreciate them in a sincere manner communicates a powerful, positive message. So, after handling a problem, listening to a customer complaint, closing a sale, or simply completing a transaction, let the customer know that you value his or her patience and cooperation.

**9. Motivate yourself.** Understand what makes you tick — and then pump yourself up throughout the day. Let your enthusiasm show. Customers prefer dealing with customer service reps who are passionate about their organizations and who love what they're doing. If you come across as indifferent or bored, the customer will mirror those sentiments. And if you're happy and pleasant, your customers will reflect those feelings too. **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.	Rising prices will always drive customers away.		
2.	Re-thinking your entire customer service operation is the best way to cope with the impacts of inflation.		
3.	Alerting customers to new products, services and offers will help customers feel good about working with you and your organization.		

## A monthly roundup ...

### No love for chatbots

According to new research, interacting with automated chatbots for customer service is viewed by consumers as a source of increasing frustration. In fact, over 72 percent of respondents in a recent survey by cloud-based call center app developer UJET reported that interaction with a chatbot is a “complete waste of time.”

*ujet.cx*

### Mayor leads customer service training

Government staff in Las Vegas, NM, are now better prepared to deal with citizens' calls. In December, all city employees participated in mandatory customer service training. To emphasize the importance of the training, the session was presented by Mayor Louie Trujillo. “I found that there was a need for it,” said Trujillo, “not because we have terrible customer service, but because it's not always what you say, but how you say it.”

*lasvegasnm.gov*

### Airline discontinues telephone customer service

Budget carrier Frontier Airlines recently made the unpopular decision to stop all telephone customer service and move travelers to digital options such as social media, Whatsapp, and online chat.

*flyfrontier.com*

## Ask the Experts

### How to address customers

*Our management asks that we “personalize” calls by including the customer’s name twice in each call. I’m not sure of the best way to address customers. Using a first name feels overly friendly, but using Mr. or Ms. sounds stuffy. Is there a standard for how to address customers?*

#### Ask the caller’s preference

“In many departments, it is standard practice to ask the caller for his or her name as a first step in the conversation,” says Ed Horrell, author of *The Kindness Revolution*. “For example, reps will say, ‘Before we get started, may I have your name?’ And follow that with, ‘Thank you Mr. Smith, may I call you John?’”

While using the customer’s name is recommended, “cutesy” names should always be avoided, says Horrell. Terms like “honey,” “sweetie,” and “dear” are more likely to annoy a customer than to please them.

#### Times change and people change

“As a rule of thumb if the customer or prospect is under the age of 50 it should be fine to address that person by their first name. However, anyone middle aged and up should be addressed by “Mr. or Ms. (last name),” says author Steven Schwartz.

“With demographics pointing to an aging population, the trend is clearly toward the Misterys of the world. I noticed recently that when I call my phone company the customer service reps always ask if they can call me Steven. Years ago when I was younger I would have said sure, but being 55 years old I don’t feel comfortable having a stranger address me by my first name. I always tell them to call me ‘Mr. Schwartz.’”

#### Avoid mistakes

IT Support Center Analyst Andrew Gilliam warns about potentially embarrassing situations in the quest to address customers correctly. “Representatives frequently mistake me for a female on the phone, completely disregarding that Andrew is typically a male name. It’s usually an honest mistake, and it’s generally not worth the embarrassment to correct them. However, being called ‘ma’am’ or ‘Ms. Gilliam’ becomes extremely frustrating when it’s repeated over, and over, and over again.

“If you’re not absolutely certain of the correct way to address someone, simply skip it or just address them by their first name.”

#### Pay attention to the relationship

“My company offers a lot of freedom in this area,” says Service Advocate Sam DeMarco. “We typically address everyone as Mr. or Ms. at the start of a relationship and move to something less formal as the relationship progresses. I even have one long-term customer who I address a Barb instead of Barbara. Several years ago she said, ‘just call me Barb’ and it stuck.”



**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 ...

## “Let me speak to your manager”

Contrary to popular belief, most customers don't really want to talk to the manager — they want to talk to someone who can take care of their needs quickly and efficiently. They want to talk to you, the rep on the phone with them right now.

## Avoid mouth noises

Hard candies, a morning bagel, even a sip of tea — they can all be a problem.

“I cannot tell you how many times I talk with people on the phone and it sounds as though they have a mouthful of mush,” says phone skills trainer Nancy Friedman. “The only thing that should be in your mouth when you are on the phone is your tongue.”

## Make customers' time a priority

When making outgoing calls to customers — or to anyone, for that matter — ask first if they have “time to talk” before rushing into what you need from them. Without obtaining this permission, you risk being perceived as just barging in and creating an interruption by suggesting that your time is more valuable than theirs.

## Service recovery via social media

More and more reps are finding themselves responsible for dealing with service recovery issues online — on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and others — as well as on the phone.

The same rules generally apply, but in addition, trainer Ann Thomas recommends that reps

work on their writing skills to become more effective. “On Twitter, for example, you are limited to 280 characters, so you have to be able to handle the written word in a very precise and concise way when you are communicating via social media,” she says.

In addition, when working with customers via Facebook or other sites, where you may have to respond to more than one customer with the same issue, try varying your empathy statements. You don't want to come across as formulaic and insincere.

Finally, she recommends taking the issue offline whenever possible — by offering an email address or phone number where the customer can reach you directly — resolving the problem privately, and then returning to the online site when the issue has been resolved so that other site visitors see that you are paying attention to customer comments and dealing with them in a positive and productive way.

## What not to do when a customer complains

When dealing with a mistake or a complaint from a customer, Marilyn Suttle and Lori Jo Vest authors of *Who's Your Gladys?*, say there are three things that you shouldn't do:

- Don't interrupt the customer. Even if you know where the conversation is going, you are just going to frustrate and antagonize the customer by trying to jump to a solution.
- Don't rationalize and explain. “By making excuses and explaining away why something happened, you are essentially negating their issue or complaint,” Suttle and Vest say.

- Don't blame someone else. Customers don't really want to know that the finance department sent the notice in error, they just want to know that you are going to contact your finance department and work out the issue. **TCC**

## Pop Quiz Answers

1. **False.** Meaningful and personalized service experiences contribute to a positive customer experience and to customer retention.
2. **False.** Focusing on the “little things” such as welcoming, thanking, and showing interest can make a big impact.
3. **True.** Listen for clues and offer meaningful recommendations to prove your organization's value to customers.

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# SkillSharpeners

The manager's companion to *Customer Communicator*

January 2023

## January's highlights

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

1. Nine "little things" that they can do to help improve customer satisfaction during times of rising inflation and increased customer expectations.
2. An "Ask the Experts" column with advice on how to address customers.
3. Customer service news, complaint-handling advice, avoiding "mush mouth," the pop quiz, and more.

It's January and that means it's time for New Year's resolutions. Love them or hate them. Keep them or break them. It's something everyone is thinking about and you can make the most of it by working together to set team resolutions for the New Year.

Team members have most likely set goals for themselves as part of the annual review process. This is the time to set resolutions — or things they'd like to work on — as a group.

Start by brainstorming resolutions that will contribute to a stronger, more positive work group.

Then use the "will do, can tell, how much" model to form team resolutions. Here's how it works:

**Will do** Describe the activity or behavior

**Can tell** Describe how your team will ensure that the activity or behavior is observable.

**How much** Describe how your team will measure this commitment.

For example,

**Will do** Celebrate excellent work that contributes to the team's success

**Can tell** At the Friday team meeting share an example that you observed with the group. Send a note of acknowledgement to a teammate and copy the entire team. Post a brief description of the action on the department's kudos board.

**How much** Aim to have at least one example shared each week.