

## **Customer Service: Problems with In-Person Customer Service**

### **Introduction**

We've talked quite a bit already about some general rules regarding customer service, including why gaining loyal customers is important to business and how knowing customers' personalities can help you serve them better. However, this lesson and the next two are going to focus in on three specific types of customer service: in person, over the phone, and in writing.

This lesson will discuss some of the issues and problems you need to be aware of if you are going to be working with internal or external customers in face-to-face situations. Keep in mind that these issues shouldn't be taken lightly. Recent surveys have found that more than 80% of shoppers believe store employees don't care about their business. Almost 60% of those surveyed take their business elsewhere when that occurs.<sup>1</sup> That's a lot of potential business to lose, especially since the loss is completely preventable.

### **Basic In-Person Customer Service Problems**

Some customer service representatives think that their job begins the moment a shopper approaches them with a question. That's not the case. Their job begins the second a customer enters the store and doesn't end until the last customer has exited.

Other employees may not realize that even though their title isn't customer service representative they are also playing a role in a customer's overall satisfaction. For example, one shopper went to a popular superstore to purchase a lift chair for her mother. Because the chair was so heavy, an employee was called to assist them in getting the item to the cashier and into the buyer's vehicle. The shopper waited. Finally, she called for assistance a second time. She waited another ten minutes, and no one came. She flagged down an employee stacking shelves in another department, and he reluctantly went searching for the needed employee. Neither one of them ever returned.

This real-life example illustrates a problem in the way employees view customers. They see them as a nuisance, as someone getting in the way of their "real" job.

Employees should never have that attitude. Instead, they must realize customers are the reason they have their "real" jobs. When all the customers go away, after all, the need for their position will also.

For this reason, good in-person customer service should be considered everyone's responsibility and should be viewed as a major element of everyone's

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<sup>1</sup>Rokes, Beverly. Customer Service. Cincinnati, OH: Southwest-Thomason, 2002.

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job position.

Another problem is that employees, including managers and supervisors, need to recognize that customer service begins immediately. Restaurants realize this. That's why they place smiling, friendly hostesses inside the door to greet customers as soon as they enter and to wish customers a good evening as they exit.

Two other in-person customer service problems are often related to one another: unprofessional behavior and/or a lack of attention to customers. We've all gone into a store and watched the workers spend more time entertaining one another than helping the customers. Joking around, flirting, and gossiping are not only annoying to customers who are trying to focus on fulfilling their shopping needs, but they also send a clear message about the lack of professionalism possessed by the employees and their employer.

### **How to Correct In-Person Customer Service Problems**

We've talked about the problems, but the good news is that all of them are easily fixable both at the individual and at the company level.

The first problem is that some employees don't view customer service as part of their job. Having mandatory customer service training for all employees, setting clear customer service guidelines everyone must follow, and adding customer service to all job descriptions is one way to change that attitude among employees. The employees themselves can make changes as well just by realizing that their jobs depend on those customers' loyalty and by treating them accordingly.

The second problem was that employees view customer service as something that is initiated by the customer. Employees should be trained to greet all customers as soon as they enter the store. They should be required to ask customers if they need assistance when they begin looking around. Employers also should shop around for employees who have a sincere interest in working with people.

Finally, the lack of attention and professionalism of many employees can be corrected simply as well. There's nothing wrong with friendliness among employees. In fact, it should be encouraged. However, employers need to draw the line when that behavior interferes with customer service. Training is again an important part of correcting the problem. Employers may also want to send in secret shoppers who can report these types of problems which usually occur when managers and supervisors are not around to witness it.

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## Problems with In-Person Customer Service Worksheet

Directions: Below are some questions related to what you just read. Read through them and think about how you would answer them. It may help you to write down your ideas so that you can come back to them later.

1. Think about a recent negative in-person customer service experience you or someone you know recently had. Briefly describe what happened. Which of the problems discussed in this lesson caused the negative experience? How could the experience have been better?
2. Some people believe that the increase in customer service problems has been caused by higher unemployment levels. How would the two issues be related? Do you agree or disagree that there may be a connection? Why?
3. Many customers of low-priced discount chains have complained about poor customer service, yet these companies are more profitable than ever. Do you believe some customers are willing to sacrifice good customer service for a lower price? Why or why not?
4. One suggestion in the lesson was to greet customers right away and to ask if you can help them. Most customers react positively to this approach, but a few just don't want to be bothered at all. What steps can you take with the latter group of customers to make sure they have satisfying shopping experiences as well?
5. Think of a store that you visit regularly, such as a supermarket or department store. Make a list of every encounter you had with an employee and whether that encounter was pleasant and helpful or not. As you go through your list, be watching for the first time you were greeted, the responsiveness of employees to your needs or questions, the ease of finding an available employee, etc. After you've analyzed your list, jot down a few suggestions for improvement that you would make to the store's management regarding their customer service.