

Customer Service: Phone Problems and How to Correct Them

Introduction

In the last lesson, we focused on providing excellent customer service in-person. Of course, that's only one method of delivering service in today's society.

Another common customer service channel is the telephone. When we have technical problems with our computers, we phone a help desk. When we need to place an order or check our checking account balance, we often use the telephone.

While most people view the telephone as a more convenient method of getting service, it can also be a difficult medium for delivering the best service possible. We talk about why that is and how to correct potential problems in this lesson.

Customer Service by Phone Problems

There are a couple of primary problems people face when they try to deliver good customer service over the phone.

One is how easy it is to become distracted or to not listen. In person, it is much more difficult for you to turn your attention away from a customer who is standing in front of you asking a question. When you're on the phone, however, you can easily become distracted by co-workers, your computer, other conversations, and more.

The problem is that when we're distracted the customer can hear it in our voice. They know we're not giving them our full attention. Also, when we don't listen, we're not able to provide the best solutions or answers because we'll have missed out on some of the conversation.

Like many problems, a big part of making corrections is realizing that the problem exists. When you know that, then you can take precautions to prevent distractions, such as turning down music or closing your door.

A second problem is a lack of understanding. When we talk on the phone, we sometimes become lazy with our English. We may talk too fast or fail to articulate. We may also use jargon or slang even when it's not appropriate because we tend to forget that there's a real person on the other end of the line.

Again, recognizing the problem will help you make necessary changes. For example, you may pay more attention to how fast you are talking. Another strategy for correcting this problem is to ask frequent questions to make sure the customer understands you AND that you are understanding the customer. After all, communication and misunderstanding can be two way streets.

Finally, it can be difficult to show customers that you are concerned about them and their problems. In person, we can easily illustrate these feelings through our facial expressions and other methods of nonverbal communication. Over the phone, however, we don't have that luxury, so we come across as insincere or uncaring even if that's not the case.

One way to prevent this problem is to always smile while you are talking to a customer. Smiling changes our voice and makes it sound more upbeat and more interested. Another method is, again, to ask questions. Even if you understand what the speaker is saying, asking questions shows that you are listening and are interested. Plus, it can prevent possible misunderstandings.

Telephone Technology & Customer Service

Most modern offices are equipped with some form of telephone technology which might include multiple lines, speaker phones, or voice mail. While all of these advances have made it easier for us to work and to meet the needs of customers, they also create more challenges we have to learn how to overcome or prevent. Let's talk about those issues a little.

Multi-line phone systems make it possible for our businesses to more efficiently deal with larger numbers of customers. However, customers often find themselves waiting on hold for long periods of time or being asked to leave a message for a call-back. This can be frustrating to callers, especially since they also lead busy lives.

While the easiest solution is to add more employees or phone lines so customers don't have to wait so long, most businesses are reluctant to make that type of investment. Therefore, you'll have to deal with the problem on your own by apologizing for long wait times and by taking messages instead of leaving customers on hold.

Speaker phones have been an asset in some offices because more than one person can take part in a conversation easily and because it allows us to talk on the phone while freely moving or working around our office. However, some customers may not want the entire office to hear their problems nor should the speaker phone conversations of your co-workers serve as a distraction to you.

The best solution is to use speaker phones sparingly and to notify customers that they are on speaker phone before they begin.

Voice mail is the 21st century's version of the answer machine. While convenient, voice mail can also cause some problems. Leaving messages and returning calls can both be sticking points that can interfere with good customer service.

When you leave a message on a voice mail, you should include your name, your phone number, your company, the hours you are available, and a brief message.

Name _____



Date _____

You should avoid trying to joke around, sound overly friendly, or sharing a long story. In the message, give the receiver some idea of the urgency regarding your call so that they can more easily prioritize their return calls.

When you receive voice mail messages, it's a good idea to jot down the caller's name and phone number in case the message is accidentally erased. You should also be sure to return those calls as soon as possible. The longer you wait the more awkward the duty becomes. If necessary, you should set a certain time each day for returning calls. You may want to have a time in the morning – the first half hour of the day or the half hour right before lunch, for example – and a time in the afternoon as well. When you do call back, be sure to mention that you are responding to their call and give them a brief summary of the message they left to jog their memory. After all, they may have made a lot of calls that day.

Lesson 5 – 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. Interactive Voice Response (IVR) systems which provide callers with a series of menus they must choose from before having their call directed to the appropriate department or information, are considered by most people to be frustrating, even though they conveniently allow 24 hour access to information, such as checking account balances and movie listings. Why do you think consumers find these systems frustrating? What is your opinion of IVR systems? How do you think they could be improved to provide better customer service?
2. Telemarketers are often viewed by consumers in a negative manner as well, even though they are trying to provide service. Why do consumers have such a low opinion of telemarketing? What should be done to improve the image of the telemarketer? Why do you think so many businesses use telemarketing even though it annoys customers?
3. Read through the following scenario, then briefly describe what Ann should have done differently.

Ann (answering phone): Morning. You've reached Acme.

Caller: I'm having a problem with my computer.

Ann (chewing gum loudly): Hold on.

Caller: But . . . (Hears hold music playing)

Ann: Do you want me to take a message? He's busy now.

Caller: Who's busy?

Ann: The person you need to talk to about your problem. He never returns his calls, so you'd be better off trying back later.

Caller (angrily): You need to learn some phone manners!

Ann: I'm just trying to help you! Call someone else if you're not happy. (She hangs up).