



# Customer Service Superiority

Powerful Strategies and Techniques for  
Mastering Customer Service Challenges

Steve Coscia, CSP

Customer Service Superiority By Steve Coscia

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## Introduction

Customer service, when boiled down to its purest form, is the act of one person helping another person. This interaction determines how a company's service will be perceived by customers. For this one-on-one relationship to work, both the customer and the service professional must be honest with each other. No problem can be resolved to either party's mutual satisfaction unless the truth about a problem's cause is revealed.

There are no short cuts around the truth, and no one will last for long in business without being honest. Customer service is a wonderful position for individuals with motivation, drive and a genuine concern for people. The skills learned in the customer service department will have a positive impact on one's career if you start off by always telling the truth no matter how much it hurts. My first rule of customer service is: ***It is better to disappoint a customer with the truth than to satisfy a customer with a lie.***

In this book, you will learn insightful lessons that will enhance your customer service career. This book is based largely on my own experiences as well as those of hundreds of clients and seminar participants who have shared their difficulties and triumphs. Many of my own mental habits were developed the old-fashioned way - by making mistakes and figuring out how not to do them again. My goal for this book is to help service professionals develop the mental habits that allow them to achieve greater career success.

## **Chapter 1: Customer Service Communication**

In this chapter, you will learn that great customer service is based on many attributes: attitude, perseverance, resilience, problem solving and excellent communication skills. These are the skills that enable you to become a terrific service provider. A positive attitude and perseverance cannot make up for a bungled communication about an order. Fortunately, communication skills can be easily learned and practiced, and the results are immediate, as you will soon learn.

### **First Impressions**

First impressions are big. Regardless of whether a company provides fast food, business consulting or high-tech manufacturing equipment – the customer’s perception of an organization is emblazoned in their mind within the first few seconds of their encounter. This reality became more apparent to me recently while my wife and I sought a contractor to replace a concrete patio in our backyard. Our search began with a list of five local concrete contractors. I phoned all five contractors within a 24-hour time period. Since my phone calls were made during the daytime, when most contractors are out working, I recorded voicemail messages. Within the next 24 hours, only three contractors had returned my phone call and their lead-time message was similar – all three contractors were booked for the next six to eight weeks. The remaining two contractors didn’t call back. To keep from telling you a long story, I will focus on the three contractors who followed up with me.

The first contractor phoned at 10:00pm while I was asleep. My wife answered the phone. The contractor was surprised to learn that I was already asleep, and my wife clearly heard his sigh of disappointment or what is technically known as “the loud exhale over the phone.” The next morning, my wife replayed in great detail the contractor’s sigh as she handed me a note with this contractor’s name and his cell phone number. My subsequent phone call to this contractor confirmed his poor telephone demeanor as his audible sighs and grunts didn’t build my confidence in his ability. Perhaps the greatest flaw was his disregard for mutual closure at the end of our phone call. The mutual closure is extremely important because it establishes a mutual understanding of what is supposed to happen next. In this case, our loud sighing friend left me with a vague understanding of whether he would be able to visit my home sometime during that week. Needless to say, the loud sigher left me rather unimpressed.

My personal encounter with the second contractor began OK and then things quickly deteriorated. His amiable and reassuring tone of voice put me at ease. His mutual closure skills were more highly developed as he made and kept his appointment to visit my home to size up the work involved and provide an estimate. But on that day while I showed him the old patio, the contractor excused himself for a minute to return to his truck so he could retrieve his clipboard and pen. As he began taking notes, he then remembered that he needed his measuring tape that resulted in a second trip back to his truck. While these two brief interruptions might appear insignificant, I quickly began to feel a sense of unease about his scatterbrained and quirky behavior. It didn’t do much to build my confidence in his organizational ability or lack thereof. After his data collection and measurement, he prepared to depart at which time I asked the scatterbrain for a business card. Unfortunately, my request resulted in another trip to his truck so that he could retrieve a business card. The scatterbrain seemed like a nice guy, but his disorganized manner left me ill at ease.

The third contractor must have learned something about the importance of the first impression. His polite and efficient telephone follow-up matched his in-person demeanor. Most striking was what appeared to be a standard operating procedure which he practiced after his truck pulled up

to my home. As I watched from my living room window, I observed the third contractor retrieve a small, index-card sized paper from his truck's sun visor. This paper must have been a checklist. In a methodical and deliberate manner, he accumulated his required tools: his clipboard, measuring tape, calculator, business cards and pen. He even looked at himself in a mirror to ensure that he looked presentable. My encounter with the process-based contractor was the best of the three. Perhaps, the most remarkable aspect of my encounters was that the process-based contractor's price quote was not the least. However, his services were perceived to be the best and based on his attention to detail he won. In any home-improvement buying decision, price is only a small factor when customers consider the lasting impression a contractor will have on a beautiful home.

### **In Review:**

- First impressions, especially in customer service, are essential.
- The first impression will result in a customer's final decision.
- Poor telephone demeanor can be a huge turn-off for customers.
- Organization and preparation before an encounter go a long way to make a good impression.

### **The Simple Stuff**

The news is out. Americans sense that we are, as a people, ruder than ever. Perhaps it is not really news at all. In fact, almost 80% of Americans believe that a lack of common courtesy is a serious problem for our society and that there is an urgent need to address it. This information was published by Public Agenda, a nonpartisan, nonprofit public opinion research and citizen education organization based in New York City. In their study entitled: "Aggravating Circumstances: A Status Report on Rudeness In America," which included items of special interest to customer service professionals, and has broader implications regarding the effect of civilized behavior on society in general. I would suggest that those who have not noticed a gradual degradation of customer service are either in denial or do not get out much. Nevertheless, for one that is unaware, now and then, service stinks!

Not long after I read of the Public Agenda study, I had an experience in a retail establishment that clearly echoed its findings. It happened while I was on vacation with my family on the eastern seaboard. Before heading to the beach one day, we went shopping for beach towels and sunscreen lotion. The cashier at the checkout counter was speaking on a cell phone while we waited for him to process our merchandise. In an instant we realized that his call was not business-related. He continued in a lively conversation while at the same time scanning our items. He then took my credit card, processed the transaction, handed me a receipt, and then waved goodbye when he finished with us. This individual never paused in his exchange with the person on the other end of the conversation. More importantly, however, was his failure to even acknowledge my presence. (Whether he realized it or not, as a customer I was partly responsible for making his paychecks possible.) His behavior exposed an attitude and a belief that suspending his telephone call would not be of any consequence in the matter. His mind-set was clearly the dynamic behind his behavior.

As I left the store, I wondered if the cashier ever considered his actions inappropriate. Did his supervisor approve of his behavior? Were there minimum expectations to monitor?

After over 20 years in customer service management, I have learned that it is necessary to set guidelines that would enable those reporting to me to perform in a manner which was consistent to the company culture.

One of the conclusions of the Public Agenda study focused on the behavior of service staff. It concluded that management must address and correct discourteous behavior in their employees. The report highlights two important data points: (1) 77% of Americans think that it is an all too common occurrence for salespeople to ignore the customer and (2) 46% of Americans have walked out of a retail establishment due to poor service. These customers may never return and will likely recount their bad service experience to others. Business owners who do not set minimum expectations for employee's behavior run the risk of losing their customers as indicated by the study's findings.

Following are a few principles retail professionals can employ to help eliminate rude behavior:

- Make eye contact with every customer and greet them with a smile
- Wear clean clothes or a company-issued shirt and nametag
- Ask customers if they were able to find everything they intended to purchase
- Answer any questions posed by the customer
- Conclude each purchase by saying something like "Thank you for shopping with us today" or "Please come back."
- Keep the checkout counter neat and orderly
- Be sure to have a pen either on your person or nearby
- Prohibit any personal phone calls while serving customers

As you can see, it takes only elementary techniques to make a positive difference. Business owners have an overwhelming responsibility of navigating their organizations through a challenging and uncertain environment these days. If left unchecked, the "people problems" in organizations will cause you to squander your time and resources. This condition causes some managers to retreat rather than lead. Don't let this happen to you! Your employees look to you for leadership. If it is not forthcoming, they will behave in a manner that is most comfortable to them. Unfortunately, this might not be in the best interest of the company.

#### **In Review:**

- Lack of common courtesy in the service industry is a recurrent issue that can hurt business
- Management must set a precedent for what is and is not acceptable behavior when working with a customer
- Refer to the above bullet points for basic principles of appropriate behavior

#### **Trade Secrets**

One of the dirty little secrets in the world of customer service involves a matter that is often carefully guarded. It rarely arises as a question among the numerous conferences at which I speak. But every now and then, a courageous attendee will broach the topic, each time leading to the same response. Someone in the audience invariably gasps when the subject arises, while everyone else stares at me anticipating my reaction.

The nature of this dirty little secret involves customer behavior, but specifically as to how a service representative deals with customers who use vulgar language.

The answer to this dilemma includes a tactical response designed to stun the customer. Customers who use vulgar or “dirty” language are seeking a confrontation. They are offensive in order to keep you on the defensive. The customer wants a victory at the expense of the representative. This win/lose outcome will not produce a mutually satisfying experience. A service representative must therefore gain a tactical advantage over the customer to enable him to achieve a win/win conclusion. A noted military tactician fighting for the Confederacy during the Civil War said the simple keys to victory are to “get there first with the most” and “always do what the enemy least expects.” These same tactics are equally applicable when handling calls from irate customers using vulgar language.

Bad manners are excusable when dealing with upset customers; vulgarity is not. Customers using crude or vulgar language usually do so because of their emotional state. Representatives should tell customers who use such language, “I realize you are upset and I want to help you. But I am not in the habit of being spoken to in that fashion, nor do I speak with people who use that kind of language.” This polite statement will keep intact the self-esteem of the customer and allow the two of you to continue in your conversation.

Should the customer persist in using vulgar language, the representative must then disregard their self-esteem and, instead, make it a point to focus on their unacceptable behavior. To prepare for this, the representative should sit up straight, take a deep breath, and muster their most authoritative vocal tone for what will come next. Ask the customer to repeat the last sentence that contained the vulgar language by saying, “Could you please repeat that last sentence, I am taking notes.” The customer should rationally think about what was just said and repeat the sentence minus the offensive speech. The customer should refrain from being vulgar from this point forward.

It is now time for the representative to gain control of the conversation. One of the best ways I know to manage an exchange is to pay the other person a compliment. This will keep you talking and them listening. After all, one is unlikely to interrupt when they are being given flattering comments. In my experience, two groups of people always respond positively to affirmative comments: men and women. Regardless of gender, the best way to gain a tactical advantage with an irate customer is to pay them a soft compliment.

The use of soft compliments allows a representative to turn the tables on difficult customers. Following are some effective soft compliments: “You did the smart thing by calling me because I can help you.” “I am glad you called because now we will be able to get things resolved.” “You have a good sense of how to get things done. You also did a very good job getting your ideas across to me.” Doing this reinforces your control of the situation by establishing yourself as the expert. Such an expert knows the difference between a good presentation and a bad presentation.

If, in extreme cases, the customer insists on the right to be vulgar, then escalate the call to your supervisor. In my experience, most telephone customers contact you for help, not so that they can be vulgar. Service representatives should strive for the win/win option and skillfully teach the problematic customer a lesson in manners. Socially unacceptable behavior is just one of the dirty little secrets in the customer service industry, but, hopefully, not for long. Perhaps service representatives everywhere will employ the aforementioned tactical advantages and establish themselves as professionals who lead by good example.

### **In Review:**

- Customers who use vulgar or “dirty” language are seeking a confrontation.
- Service rep must gain control to achieve a win/win outcome
- Begin with a polite statement regarding their language.
- If the customer continues to use vulgar language, inform them in an authoritative tone that you are taking notes on the conversation.
- Once you have control of the conversation, pay the customer a soft compliment
- If the vulgarity persists, call your supervisor

### **Details, Details, Details**

Establishing and keeping good business relationships often depends on the ability of the customer service professional to discern, capture and qualify details. Big business deals can go sour due to a tiny detail that might have been incorrect or omitted.

While speaking to a local business association, I discussed the phenomenon of distinguishing similar sounding consonants over the telephone. I explained, for example, how a telephone did not accurately transmit the subtle differences between the letter’s “S” and “F”. One of the attendees immediately jumped out of his seat and shouted, “Now I know why!” The room in which we were meeting fell silent as everyone’s attention was drawn to him. I halted my presentation and asked this excitable attendee to share his epiphany with the group.

He related an event from the previous week in which his administrative assistant had made an appointment for him to meet with a prospect on the sixth of that month. However, when he arrived at the appointment, the prospect was obviously upset, believing their appointment was to be on the fifth. This attendee shared with us his embarrassment and regret for showing up a day late due to a minor detail. The misunderstanding had harmed their business relationship.

The words “fifth” and “sixth” have a subtle and audible difference, depending on how they are pronounced. These two words sound quite similar when speaking to someone on the telephone. A professional who regularly employs the telephone for business purposes should know that similar sounding consonants be qualified by asking “Is that “fifth” as in five or “sixth” as in six?” This extra effort ensures the accuracy of details.

Other similar sounding consonants include the letters “B” and “D”, “N” and “M”, and “T” and “P”. Investing a few seconds to ask, “Is that “N” as in Nancy or “M” as in Mary?” can help avert future problems.

My experience in interpersonal communication is that some people are either afraid or too embarrassed to ask qualifying questions. Some risk having wrong information rather than being proactive by asking a simple question. It takes courage for many to ask questions.

The basics of good communication between two people include the mutual understanding that talking is not communicating. The best communicators are people who have learned that good communication happens when someone speaks and another person hears, qualifies, and then understands what was spoken. Never underestimate the power of qualification, especially when it comes to capturing details.

Paying attention to details also requires that a customer service professional takes the time to note the particulars in writing. Writing down key facts about a customer's name, location, order quantity, shipping details, due date, or part number are all essential pieces of information not to be left to memory. A customer service professional should always have something to write with and something to write on.

At a minimum, four key questions must be answered during every customer service encounter. The easiest way to recall these key questions is to remember four simple "W" words: Who, When, Why and What. Here is the methodology:

**Who** – The person, his or her title, company, department and location.

**When** – Initial contact date and time, due date, shipping date, and follow up date.

**Why** – Why did he or she call us? The purpose for the customer's call.

**What** – What do they want from us? What is their expectation?

Capturing details using this approach will enable a customer service professional to be more effective. Getting the information right the first time reduces the need for follow up, rework, returns and strained business relationships. Even in this age of computers, laptops, and PDAs, from time to time pen and paper still work best.

I learned a number of years ago that the person with the best notes always wins. The discipline of concentrating on and qualifying and capturing essential details will pay off with success in business. World-class customer service organizations have learned to be courageous listeners. This means they dare to ask questions when they are uncertain of their facts or believe they have incomplete information. It is as simple as that.

#### **In Review:**

- Keeping track of little details can save a business from future headaches and potentially disastrous outcomes
- A great example of a detail to focus on is what letter is being said over the phone. Some letters sound the same (such as f and s) and it is good practice to confirm what letter was said.
- Writing down specifics is an effective way to stay organized and avoid committing things to memory only
- At a minimum, four key questions must be answered during every customer service encounter: who, what, when, and why.

## **Chapter 2: Customer Service Opportunities**

In this chapter, you will learn about several invaluable behavioral choices companies and employees make that greatly affect the customer service experience. The first section provides a hypothetical situation wherein a miscommunication caused by a service representative talking too much leads to customer dissatisfaction. Then, you will learn why, how, and when to say no to a customer and the nuances that surround negative responses. Furthermore, the anecdote about hitchhiking, elaborates on the importance of appropriate eye contact and a professional smile in establishing rapport with a customer. The final section, about customer retention, after an initial customer acquisition, is a vital lesson in satisfaction.

### **Editorializing: Less is More**

Edward is a customer service representative for Action Heating and Air Conditioning Company. It's Tuesday and Edward has just received a verbal dressing-down. Edward had taken a telephone call from one of his customers who phoned to demand to know the whereabouts of his order. "You said it would be here on Tuesday," roared the caller. "Today is Tuesday and I want my order." Edward responds by explaining that he did not say the order would arrive on Tuesday, but, rather, "I said that my distributor would ship it on Friday. I would probably receive it on Monday and then I would ship it to you on Tuesday." Edward and his customer could argue endlessly over what was supposed to happen on Tuesday. For the record, Edward is telling the truth. But it really does not matter because he made the unfortunate decision to editorialize concerning the customer's order.

Truth be told, we have probably all editorialized at one time or another when asked a question. For example, someone might ask you for the time, but you respond with instructions on how to make a clock. Editorializing occurs when you provide more information than is required. To the service professional, this information might be related to a specific event that, in and of itself, would not be critical to customer satisfaction, but could easily result in confusion or a misunderstanding. Edward should have streamlined his message, focusing on specifics that would be of assistance to his customer; in this instance, the date on which the customer would receive his order.

Incidents such as the one described above occur because some customers will hear only what they want to hear, regardless of what you actually say. In all customer interactions, it is not what a service professional says; it is what a customer hears that matters most. Providing exceptional customer service is all about meeting or exceeding customer expectations. This reality begs the question: What do customers expect?

Unfortunately, the answer to this question is relative since every customer is different and their expectations therefore will vary depending on their own unique situation. Each customer has individual needs, wants, and expectations. With this in mind, the primary objective of a service professional should be to maintain consistency in his or her message, whether it is verbal or written communication. The role of management is to create an infrastructure that enables front line representatives to convey a clear, concise, and comprehensive message to a customer void of editorializing. This requires access to data, accurate information, and uncomplicated parameters on how to communicate the same to customers. In the absence of such, front line representatives will tend to editorialize.

A first step for management in establishing a consistent message to customers should include a list of the various situations that occur on a daily basis. While brainstorming with front-line

representatives, two vital pieces of information for each situation surface: (1) key points to cover with the customer, and (2) a suggested response. Building a repertoire of key points and corresponding responses eventually yields a heightened sense of consistency awareness, resulting in additional recommendations and continual improvement.

I have learned that words relevant to scheduling, i.e., time and day, should be used with caution due to the nature of what a customer hears. In Edward's case, the customer heard three different daily events – namely Friday, Monday, and Tuesday. The customer mistakenly reasoned that Tuesday was the delivery date perhaps because it was the last day mentioned during his discussion with the service representative. They might have just as easily latched onto Friday or Monday as their delivery date.

I urge service professionals to be on guard against editorializing. When dealing with delivery confirmations, it is best only to convey time and day information that is directly related to achieving customer satisfaction. There is a simple rule about editorializing: Customers cannot hear what service professionals do not say. Armed with this knowledge, a service professional should eliminate - or at the very least, minimize - editorializing by focusing on a message that will satisfy the customer.

Another way to avoid misinterpretations is to follow up with each and every customer prior to service delivery. A simple telephone call or e-mail that summarizes the service event is a proactive technique that can minimize confusion and misunderstanding. Let's face it, customers are sometimes wrong in what they perceive. But that is not the point. The role of a world-class service operation is to avert mix-ups by not allowing them to happen in the first place. Some customers are busy, harried, distracted, and impatient when they call. It is the responsibility of the service professional to help these customers achieve satisfaction regardless of their circumstances. Organizations that focus on and strive to improve the subtleties and nuances of the communication skills of service representatives are the companies that succeed.

Over time, projecting subtleties and nuances through tone of voice will become second nature to a service professional.

### **In Review:**

- Editorializing: when a service professional provides more information than is actually required, which can lead to miscommunication and confusion.
- In all customer interactions, it is not what a service professional says; it is what a customer hears that matters most.
- Every customer is different, so the primary objective of a service professional should be to maintain consistency in his or her message.
- Management should create an infrastructure that enables front line representatives to convey a clear and concise message void of editorializing.
- Words relevant to scheduling should be used with caution as they are susceptible to misunderstanding.
- Following up with each customer prior to service delivery is a good way to avoid confusion

## The Art of Saying “No”

Every service and sales professional faces the same dilemma on a daily basis whether customers contact them via telephone, walk into their establishment, or correspond in writing. It is not driven by malice or deceit. Most often it is simply the natural progression of the sales and service process. Your transaction is moving ahead smoothly when the customer stops to ask a question about the product, service or company policies. Then anxiety builds up inside. You would prefer to say “Yes,” or “Certainly, our product can do that,” or “I can ship it today.” But you will not utter any of those phrases today because you must speak the truth. And the truthful answer is “No,” or “I am sorry, but our product does not do that,” or “I cannot ship it today.”

This is the quandary of how to say “No.” Saying “No” might make you feel unpopular or appear like a killjoy. Conveying seemingly bad news to someone else might bring to an end all of the goodwill that you have been creating while attempting to negotiate a sale or provide a service. Regardless of how a service professional might feel personally about having to say “No” to a customer, sometimes the answer must be “No.” What separates the seasoned professionals from amateurs in the sales and service business are three distinct behaviors: (1) knowing when to say “No,” (2) knowing why to say “No” and, (3) knowing how to say “No.”

The first key behavior involves a sense of timing and good listening skills. Most service professionals have an instinctual sense when dealing with a customer that they must respond in the negative. This “sixth sense” triggers our response to provide an immediate answer. Our reply is communicated without any pause whatsoever on the heels of the customer inquiry. This is not an acceptable reaction since timing is a vital communication skill. We should allow ourselves a moment or two to formulate a qualifying question in order to ascertain the importance of the criteria. As an example, if a customer were to ask “Can you ship my order today?” you might qualify your answer by saying “If you received the order the day after tomorrow, would that be OK?” Your question qualifies the criteria required to achieve customer satisfaction. Should the customer answer “Yes,” then you have the flexibility to ship the order tomorrow, so it arrives on the following day. In this illustration, the technical answer to the question was “No.” However, with a pause, some time to formulate a rational response, and a bit of finesse, a much more creative answer surfaced.

There will be instances when the consequences of doing what a customer requests will outweigh any benefits. One such case might arise when a service professional risks the stability of his fulfillment system in order to satisfy the request of a specific customer. In said circumstance, it is important that the customer understands why you cannot carry out their request. Any explanation must include the final key behavior: knowing how to say “No.”

The concept of knowing how to say “No” begins with an adherence to the fundamental principle of saying what you can do rather than what you cannot do. When a service professional conveys what they can do, it keeps the proverbial door open so that the dialogue and the business relationship may continue. However, when a service professional resorts to what he cannot do, it threatens to limit future dialogue as well the business relationship.

One of my clients has, with a simple phrase, heightened their service vernacular and the satisfaction of their customers. That phrase is: “Here’s what I can do.” This axiom is posted on the workstation of each of their customer service representatives to keep it at the forefront of their mind. It produces two key benefits: (1) It keeps the door open and, (2) It gives the service representative something to say while he thinks creatively about how to respond to customer

demands. When it comes to keeping customers satisfied and the door of business opportunities open, a little time may make all the difference.

There are customers with problems and problem customers. As you gain experience in this industry, it will get easier and easier to determine which you are dealing with in any particular situation. Once you know what kind of problem it is that you are dealing with, you will know how to go about resolving the issue. Learn to view every service interaction as a training session. When dealing with angry customers we are more apt to make mistakes. No one is perfect. People make mistakes - when you do, learn from them.

### **In Review:**

- Regardless of how a service professional may feel, sometimes we are unable to fulfill a customer's request.
- Knowing how, when, and why to say no is crucial and a nuanced skill that takes practice.
- Give yourself a moment to formulate a response before declining a customer's request.
- Saying no is actually about saying what you can do instead of what you cannot (i.e. starting with "Here's what I can do."). It keeps the door open and gives the service representative a moment to craft a reply.

### **Eye Contact and Customer Service**

The warm summer months remind me of my youth and the adventurous activities in which I embarked. I suppose that my nature as a person always contained an element of recklessness. Every person has a different threshold for risk and adversity – I am a person who thrives on the adventure of the unknown along with the associated risks which might ensue.

One summer excursion which comes to mind involved a hitchhiking trip through much of New England and Eastern Canada. I hitchhiked from Long Island to Montreal, then to Quebec City and on through New Brunswick to Nova Scotia and then back to New York through New England. It was the summer of 1975 and hitchhiking was vogue among college students who were interested in an economical way to travel and meet students from other countries.

One of the first important lessons I learned about successful hitchhiking involved building a relationship with a prospective ride. When I began my hitchhiking trip, I was standing alongside the New York State Thruway as cars and trucks whisked by at 60 MPH, all the while holding a sign which read "Montreal." After being stuck in one spot for more than one hour with no success and little hope for improvement I began to assess the situation. After a few minutes of rational thought, I decided to walk to the next entrance ramp and hitchhike from there. My logic was that the vehicles would be traveling at a much slower speed, while on the ramp, and therefore stopping would be more convenient. I arrived at the next Thruway entrance ramp and within five minutes a driver stopped for me. This driver stopped not only because he was driving at a slower speed but because he and I had made eye contact which established two seconds of rapport. Once I was in the vehicle, I introduced myself and built upon the rapport which began with the eye contact. The success of this lesson served me well during the remainder of my journey – hitchhike where vehicles drive slowly, smile, and make eye contact with the driver.

In the customer service industry, non-verbal behaviors such as eye contact play a large role in establishing rapport. I have observed a noticeable absence of eye contact in business and

social interactions. For example, I have encountered numerous cashiers that do not make eye contact with me – the paying customer. The indifference and apathy which I sense from an impersonal cashier does little to enhance the value of their employer's retail establishment. The lack of eye contact is a subtle way of the cashier saying, "we don't care whether you shop here again."

For all service professionals, eye contact in addition to a smile ought to be a standard operating procedure. Managers should enforce that employees who work with customers, learn to greet, make eye contact and smile. While this appears to be intuitive – it is not. I work with organizations who hire me to teach their employees how to greet, make eye contact and smile. In today's world, interpersonal skills need to be taught at every level. Maintaining eye contact does not mean staring at a customer. Staring makes customers uncomfortable. So, what's the difference between meaningful eye contact and staring? Socially acceptable eye contact lasts every 3 seconds or so, staring is continued beyond that. These simple yet effective non-verbal behaviors convey a willingness to cooperate prior to any spoken words. A service professional shares a plethora of information with customers about his attitude, aptitude, and professionalism by his demeanor.

When I speak publicly, I urge my audiences to enforce positive service behaviors – especially when these behaviors are free. The greeting, good eye contact and a nice smile do not cost a penny. In fact, when a service professional fails to do this they are probably costing their employer more money by diminishing opportunities for repeat business. It cost just as much time to smile as it does to frown – so all things being equal go ahead and convey a professional smile.

#### **In Review:**

- Eye contact and a professional smile upon greeting a customer immediately establish positive rapport.
- Build a relationship with your prospective client. A smile costs nothing and plays a large role in establishing rapport.
- The absence of eye contact can convey indifference and apathy.
- Maintaining eye contact for longer than 3 seconds is considered staring and should be avoided. Too much of a good thing is bad.

#### **Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde Service Styles**

I wonder if some companies will ever understand the dynamics and delicate balance between customer acquisition and customer retention. I believe that most companies do not grasp the implications of why acquisition and retention should be part of the same infrastructure. Sadly, too many companies view acquisition and retention as two separate initiatives and thereby suffer the consequences. Like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the story of a man who transforms himself into a monstrous villain, many organizations maintain dual personalities regarding their treatment of customers. The following example depicts my experience with companies who suffer from the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde disorder.

As a customer, I have been wooed by a company looking to attract new customers. This company has invested a small fortune in marketing, advertisements, and outreach campaigns to create awareness and hopefully persuade people like me to buy. If I am persuaded to buy, then this company's marketing has been successful in its acquisition attempt. As a new customer, I

experience boatloads of thankfulness and gratitude for making such a wise choice. The honeymoon period lasts only as long as it takes for a problem to arise which results in my call for help. At this juncture, I begin to experience the Mr. Hyde personality of the company as I trudge through their cryptic and disjointed telephone automated attendant. Once I am in a queue, waiting to speak to a representative, I am informed of a 10-minute wait for the next agent. During this encounter, I can't help but think about the stark contrast in corporate behavior between their marketing effort (Dr. Jekyll) and their after sales support (Mr. Hyde). This incongruous behavior makes a company's marketing effort appear disingenuous - as though a breach in goodwill has occurred.

Customers disappointed with the Mr. Hyde style of service may defect, and search for another supplier. This desertion instigates a customer retention campaign within the company and soon the wooing and acquisition along with the big-budget spending behavior kicks in to save the day. There seems to be no limit to what a company will spend to acquire a customer, but once the sale is closed then cost-cutting and mediocrity are the order of the day. This cycle may continue numerous times as a standard operating procedure within some companies. I suggest that the root cause of this cyclical behavior is at the heart of a debate which has been going on for decades. The debate is about whether the customer service effort is a responsibility of the sales or operations department.

I believe that a company's customer service effort ought to be a function of the sales department. My own experience has taught me that sales and customer service go hand in hand as mutual entities – especially in the area of information sharing. Salespeople get valuable referral information by speaking with current customers to help feed their prospect sales pipeline. In addition, salespeople have more upselling opportunities when they have access to customers. Other benefits include the valuable marketing research which exists when customers contact the company with a question, problem, or a complaint.

When I was a customer service manager, I established a system by which our customers were asked one question each week. The questions were basic but informative. For example, one question queried a caller on their use and application of our product. Another question involved the customer's perception of our service effort and our ability to answer questions and resolve problems. Answers to each question were automatically tabulated in a database and the results were fed to the marketing department. This ongoing effort enabled the sales, service, and marketing departments to work in conjunction as a smooth operation.

#### **In Review:**

- The opportunity to create and maintain a stable customer operation is achievable without the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde experience.
- Customer acquisition and retention go hand-in-hand.
- Now that you have acquired the customer, you must retain them.
- Ask a customer a question a week and use their feedback.
- Customer service representatives should be the responsibility of the sales department.
- Setting up a system to continue communication with the customer post-sale is a good way to build retention and satisfaction.

### **Chapter 3: Customer Service Relationships**

In this chapter you will learn why communicating well and expanding your vocabulary helps build better customer relationships. Service professionals who make positive self-improvement choices, such as empathy, listening and patience, bolster their own self-control. Customers buy from professionals who are likable and likability hinges on relationships. Business relationships thrive when service professionals build rapport with positive verbal and non-verbal communication.

#### **Raise the Bar, Don't Dumb Down**

Is it just me or do you also sense a general tendency towards mediocrity relative to business communication? I am not referring to the use of cryptic or abbreviated jargon for internet correspondence, but rather the vocabulary used by individuals when speaking.

Some of the clients I serve have requested that I alter my vocabulary when training their staff. Mind you, these individuals are mostly young, college educated professionals whose primary role is to communicate with customers. Does not mastering vocabulary influence them so that they can communicate in a more clear, concise, and comprehensive manner? Is this not what companies should be striving for?

I typically respond to a call to modify my vocabulary with a tongue-in-cheek message about a free learning opportunity because I offer not to charge extra for bigger words. My humor frequently is not well received. "They just won't understand what you're talking about if you use big words," these clients say. The vocabulary bar unfortunately has been lowered to a fourth or fifth grade level in many business operations. This is a shameful trend.

To counter a client request that I dumb down my subject matter, I am resolute in my conviction that their staff can and will rise to the challenge of expanding their vocabulary. "Just let me do my stuff and let's see what happens," I say.

At the start of my training sessions, I share the concept that talkers are learners. Students are urged to ask questions if they do not understand something. "Asking a dumb question is better than fixing dumb mistakes," I exhort. "Shame on you if you leave this room without having all of your questions answered." I encourage this exercise by pointing out that a person of courage is not afraid to ask questions. I then reward the first person to ask a question with a verbal compliment. This recognition heightens their self-esteem and also influences others to do likewise. I urge my students to speak up because it is likely they will learn more if they verbalize their questions. When students speak up and voice their perspective, they in turn trigger the point of view of others. I make asking questions a positive experience.

As part of my presentation, I speak about the value of articulation, that the purpose of a consonant is to separate the vowels. By focusing on verbal minutia, my students are forced to think differently about their vocal image. What one says becomes more articulate when consonants start and stop the vowel sounds. I urge service professionals to speak in a precise and articulate fashion in order to convey a positive vocal image of both themselves and the company which they represent. This admonition is sometimes met with questions such as: "What is a consonant?" or "What does articulate mean?" or "What do you mean by minutia?" The questions do not concern me since my intention is to train, share information, and inculcate a specific message to my students. I believe that only a courageous person will ask questions

about something beyond their understanding. Adults too often fear appearing uninformed, so they pretend that they understand something even when they do not.

I am adamant in my belief that those who master their words will also master language. And it is language that enables people to discuss, debate, and build relationships.

Needless to say, my role as a customer service consultant now includes developing the vocabulary of my client's employees. I understand that enabling my students to communicate well is a vital step towards enhancing their customer service performance.

My wife bought me a little, 84-page book published by the editors of the *American Heritage Dictionaries* entitled *100 Words Every High School Student Should Know*. Knowing my affection for words, she thought that I would appreciate the content. Perhaps the most startling thing about this book was that I did not know 10% of the word definitions. I suppose it is relative as to what constitutes a high school vocabulary. For me, it is an opportunity to continue learning.

### **In Review:**

- Always ask questions, even if you may think they are dumb questions. It's better to ask now than making a dumb mistake down the road.
- Expanding your vocabulary improves your life.
- Communicating well heightens customer service.

### **Dehumanizing Today's Customers**

It does not happen often, perhaps once a month. It occurs typically during one of my seminars or a luncheon speech. An attendee will sit there with an obvious look of dissatisfaction because I am not answering their question with the response that they had anticipated. Their reaction might be a result of inexperience or a misunderstanding of the field of customer service. Additionally, it is a signal to me that the person asking the question perhaps is not yet ready to be serving customers. Could it be that some service professionals have become so accustomed to a culture of immediate results and instant gratification that they fail to grasp the true nature of their line of work? My stomach twists into knots each time I find myself faced with this predicament.

The situation I described above is in reference to a question posed by a seminar attendee concerning the handling of difficult or irate customers. They had expected me to share a profound or even magical tactic that would immediately placate an irate caller, getting them to cease their tirade, smile, and become submissive. The question is usually phrased something like, "How do I make them stop yelling?" or "How do I make them go away?"

What is most disturbing to me is the tone or attitude of the attendee and their implication that customers are things. I get the sense that this type of attendee may not fully understand the concept of putting themselves in the place of the customer for that moment. This notion seems foreign to the attendee because they do not really view the customer as a person. The customer to them becomes an inanimate entity. Feelings, therefore, are of no consequence. That also extends to empathy, patience, or good listening.

My response usually starts with the following message, “We can’t really make customers do anything. In the world of customer service, the customer’s behavior is outside of our sphere of control. The only behavior that a service professional can control is their own.”

The person who asked the initial questions at this point starts to wince and make visible signs of disagreement. I then begin to feel the knot tighten in my gut. To further make my point, I explain that handling a difficult customer is hard work but that there are techniques a service professional can utilize that will yield positive results. “It takes time,” I explain.

By now I sense their impatience as their facial expression conveys the following plea, “Just tell me how to make them go away happy.” This attitude is really not a surprise to me. I can usually detect this type of individual in a crowd early in my talk. I just continue to smile and remain with the tried and true method that has served me so well for more than 20 years.

At the beginning of one of my business presentations, I make a few remarks about the importance of a smile when serving customers. I present clinical proof that a smile is not just a reflection of our feelings, but that it can also change the way we feel. Facial muscles affect attitude and behavior depending on whether we smile or frown. I urge service professionals to smile and advise them that an insincere smile is better than a sincere frown. I sometimes see a few skeptical faces in the audience after my reference to the smile. It is usually one of these cynical attendees who just does not get the concept.

Any worker with even a minimum amount of customer interaction, whether in retail or wholesale, must understand that dealing successfully with the capricious nature of people is a required skill. An employee is misguided if they believe that learning to operate a cash register is a required skill but that dealing with difficult customer behavior is not.

How did we get to a point in our business culture where customers have become dehumanized? I surmise the answer lies in the technological changes that have resulted in so many automated transactions. An automated transaction is based on perfunctory and sequential steps that yield a predictable outcome. Little or no human interaction is required whether it occurs on the internet or at the grocery store. Do some service professionals wish that their face-to-face customer encounters would instead resemble the automated transaction with its absence of a smile, a greeting, an invitation to help, and a thank you? I hope not.

### **In Review**

- The only behavior that a service professional can control is their own.
- There is no quick fix to satiate a customer’s needs, especially one that is being difficult.
- It is important to treat every customer not as an object or thing, but as a human who deserves to be treated properly.

### **Get Personal with Prospects**

Valentine's Day has always been a special day for me, first because it is my birthday and second because it conjures up childhood memories of sending friends and relatives a Valentine's Day greeting card. This tradition was not reserved for sweethearts and lovers only - rather it was an opportunity to make anyone feel special with a personal and heartfelt message. I remember bringing stacks of Valentine's Day cards to school for my closest friends, both male

and female. Among the numerous Valentines which I received each year, there was usually one or two from girl classmates who may have had affection for me - great memories!

Being personal, especially among business associates, in today's politically correct environment might seem uncomfortable to some – it's easy for me. I can't help it. As a customer service professional, I have learned that the easiest way to build rapport with a person is to get the other person to talk about themselves. A tactic that works best in building rapport is an open-ended dialogue which fires up the other person's enthusiasm and the subsequent conversation.

Many years ago, I learned a key phrase that helped define the art of conversation. The phrase goes like this: A bore talks to you about himself, a gossip talks to you about others and a brilliant conversationalist talks to you about yourself. On numerous occasions, the practice of being personal and building rapport has served me well.

During a recent business lunch with a prospective client, I had the feeling that I wasn't making enough of an impression. I had already listened carefully and learned about my prospect's company and their operational difficulties. I had shared information about my background, the books I had written and my company's proprietary training tools.

The conversation was slowing down, and we were obviously running out of things to talk about. My prospect was being polite, but I could tell she was as uncomfortable as I was. If we didn't do something soon, the lunch meeting would become unproductive and a waste of time for both of us.

I decided to practice what I preach. I got personal. I shared a personal experience with the prospect. I told her that I had traveled to Italy a few years ago to do some family research in my grandfather's village. The research material would hopefully become a book someday. I told her about my ancestor's emigration to the United States more than 100 years ago and about how I had interviewed my father during the last ten years of his life. Conveying my family's adventure and the recently uncovered information from my trip regained my prospects attention and the enthusiasm led our conversation toward my client sharing personal experiences as well as those of an employee who had just visited Ireland to look up her family roots. My prospect insisted that I meet this employee. Needless to say, the conversation was ignited with vigor, vitality and colorful stories as my prospect and I really got to know each other.

The prospect is now a client. This client has since referred me to other prospects who I have converted into clients. The referrals keep coming from this one client because she really likes me as a person. Simply put, we built rapport. More important than our business relationship is our friendship.

In some business situations, more than a keen sense and subject matter expertise is required. Our clients don't care how much we know until he or she knows how much we care. The things that we are interested in and feel passionate about will enable a person to express genuine excitement that others want to be part of. C.S. Lewis said that friendship is born when one person says to another, "What you too? I thought that I was the only one." It's as simple as that. Building greater rapport with our clients and associates is possible if we are willing and courageous enough to let our guard down by being personal.

Invest a few moments in thinking about how you might make someone feel special. Go ahead – get personal.

### **In Review:**

- Build a relationship with your prospective clients
- Sharing personal experiences with a future client may break the ice
- Have open-ended dialogue, this will build the conversation
- A bore talks to you about himself, a gossip talks to you about others and a brilliant conversationalist talks to you about yourself.

### **Vital Verbal & Nonverbal Greeting Behavior**

I have nothing but the utmost respect for those in the medical profession. The General Practitioner (GP) for my family is a man of excellent reputation in whom I trust. He and his office staff have served my family with care and skill through numerous routine and emergency episodes during the past fifteen years. Perhaps what I find most valuable about the relationship with my GP is that we are the same age. This allows us to compare notes about our changing physical health as we age.

One of the changes which I have had to endure is a degenerative case of carpal tunnel syndrome in my right hand. This condition was exacerbated after handwriting the same sentence on numerous postcards for company marketing purposes.

I spoke with my general practitioner regarding available options in an attempt to circumvent surgery. He first suggested that I undergo an electromyography (EMG) to determine the severity of any muscle and nerve deterioration. This seemed to me like good advice and I agreed to the EMG procedure. My GP promptly wrote me a prescription slip, which included the carpal tunnel symptoms in my right hand, and I made an appointment for an EMG with a local Hand Clinic.

I arrived a few minutes early for the appointment – which is my habit – and soon experienced the worst office reception I have ever endured. I suppose my hypersensitivity was due to feelings of apprehension concerning a medical procedure unfamiliar to me and thus arrived at the appointment with a sense of suspicion about the EMG. The best remedy for a new patient like me who is wary about a procedure is to first put that individual at ease. This Hand Clinic unfortunately had not learned the importance of first impressions.

I noticed at once upon entering the reception area of the Hand Clinic that the receptionist was busy with another patient. I introduced myself to the receptionist once my turn finally came. She immediately overwhelmed me with a barrage of questions without so much as a smile, a greeting, or a welcome. It is my belief that the best question to ask upon an initial encounter is “How may I help you?” but this tactic was absent from her repertoire. Her questions were, “Are you here for physical therapy?” followed without delay by “Do you need X-rays?” My response to this onslaught was jaw-dropping disbelief. Perhaps my stunned facial expression motivated her to ask a more pertinent question, namely “Are you a new patient?” My affirmative response to that question along with my confirmation of an appointment provoked her into searching her records. The receptionist failed to locate my name upon review of an appointment book. This led to a curt remark that I was not on her list. I informed her that my primary doctor had referred me to this Hand Clinic and that someone from the facility had telephoned a day earlier to confirm the appointment. “Have you ever been here before?” she asked, only to learn that it was my first visit to this facility. This led to a rolling of her eyes, a hand on her hip, and a condescending tone of voice as she informed me that I was a “...very new patient.” I could only

assume that I was being perceived as a high-maintenance patient requiring a new application with the requisite data entry.

Then in an authoritative manner she asked to see my “script.” I was unaware that a “script” was terminology for a prescription, and innocently asked, “What’s a script?” My naïve answer resulted in yet another salvo of all that the Hand Clinic would NOT be able to do in the absence of a “script”. “I can’t admit you without a script,” the receptionist declared. She followed this by stating, “The doctor won’t know how to help you without a script.” I had by this time made the connection between a “script” and a prescription slip. After announcing that I did have a prescription slip, another patient had entered the reception area.

The receptionist turned her attention towards the new patient perhaps because her encounter with me was tiresome. I slowly backed away from the counter and exited the Hand Clinic still reeling from my shock and disbelief. My physical health is too important to me to place in the hands of seeming incompetents. The doctors at the Hand Clinic may be terrific, but their expertise will remain a latent asset until their receptionist learns to convey a pleasant first impression to patients. I subsequently contacted my primary doctor to confirm another location where I could get an EMG.

All organizations would do well to make it standard operating procedure for their receptionists to meet clients with a smile, a polite greeting, and an invitation to help. The verbal and nonverbal behavior of a receptionist speaks loudly about an organization.

### **In Review**

- Always greet customers with a smile and a hello, as well as “how may I help you?”
- Do not bombard your clients with a multitude of questions when they first arrive.
- A curt attitude and exasperated body language can easily turn people away.
- Answer any questions a customer has with patience and understanding.

## Chapter 4: Customer Service Etiquette

In this chapter, you will learn about proper phone etiquette and how it can improve customer relations and business. This chapter discusses the intricacies of voice mail and how they can be streamlined for efficiency. Then, you will read about how the principles of phone therapy can be applied to improving customer service. This segues into the following section on polite vernacular. Also included is an explanation of “Dreaded Morning Calls” and why service professionals should be wary. This chapter concludes with a case study about handling difficult customers.

### Telephone Etiquette

It happens frequently, sometimes even daily, and we experience it at a very personal level. You make a telephone call with the intention of speaking with a colleague, a vendor, or a customer. You instead get their voice mail. Initial disappointment gives way to the reality that you must deal with the situation and begin to struggle with what to say and how to say it. Had you reached a person, you would likely start your conversation with a greeting or perhaps a question about how the other person was feeling. Then you would be prepared to respond with how things are going with yourself. All in all, this is the makeup of a very nice social interchange. But now you must speak to a machine which cares about neither you nor the person for whom it is taking messages. The machine is merciless, unbiased, and highly efficient. It will capture in great detail every nuance of your voice if you were to struggle through a cryptic, unintelligible, or rushed message.

Voice mail gets a bad rap. I hear the same tired complaints about voicemail when consulting with organizations regardless of their location. “No one ever calls me back.” “I need an answer now, I can’t wait until later.” “I don’t know whether the person I am leaving a message for is even in the building.” I believe that these complaints are for the most part a manifestation of a systemic problem. The trouble is one of cause and effect, i.e., Garbage In, Garbage Out (GIGO).

In technical terms, GIGO occurs if invalid data is entered into a program; the resulting output also will be worthless. GIGO is usually referenced to the fact that computers, unlike humans, will unquestionably process the most illogical of input data resulting in an unsound output.

I view a voice mail system as nothing more than an input/output device. If we insert garbage, we will likely receive garbage. In terms of voice mail systems, garbage includes messages filled with one or more of the following:

**Rapid pace of speech:** This makes it almost impossible for the person hearing the message to capture pertinent information. Some listeners have been known to replay the same message numerous times in an attempt to write down a telephone number. This clear waste of time frustrates the person listening to the message and also tarnishes the image of the fast-talker who left the message.

**Verbal junk:** This usually manifests itself in the person who is uncertain as to what to say and instead stumbles with sounds like “Uhhhm,” “Duuuh,” or “Hmmm”. The voice mail system captures their ramblings for public record as the caller attempts to pull together their ideas. Business professionals ought to be careful of what they say into voice mail as these messages are digital files which can be shared or distributed among others.

**Non-contiguous details:** This phenomenon is a result of inadequate preparation – or the absence of any - prior to making a telephone call. The person leaving the telephone (voice mail) message skips from one detail to another with no regard to the sequential flow. Imagine then the person who listens to this message trying to connect disjointed pieces of information.

Telephone messages would be of higher quality if the above three maladies could be avoided. The more quality goes in, then the more quality inevitably will come out. I believe that voice mail greetings can invite a quality message by asking callers to speak slowly, to state their telephone number twice, to leave only vital or important details, along with a best time for a return call.

A service professional should acknowledge receipt of voice mail messages with a return telephone call to the person who left the message. This is important even if the subject matter in the message will not be immediately handled, resolved, or dealt with. Acknowledgements go a long way towards keeping customers informed and at ease. Depending on the nature of your business, voicemail greetings can also include information about your whereabouts, for example, whether you are in the office, out for part of the day, or on the road.

Business professionals should check their voicemail messages frequently each day, preferably once an hour. By doing so, if an urgent matter arises, you can deal with it sooner, rather than later.

Voice mail is a powerful business tool in the hands of a competent person who understand the systemic implications of GIGO.

Whether the service communication is conducted through voice mail or in person, details alone, though vitally important, are not enough. Service professionals can be competent, they can ooze confidence and health, they can handle all of the important details efficiently and resolve issues quickly, yet they may still leave the customer feeling cold from the service interaction. For the customer, it's a bit like getting a very nice birthday gift in an unwrapped box. The wrapping helps to make it special.

### **In Review:**

- Telephone messages run on a Garbage In, Garbage Out (GIGO) system.
- Garbage voice mail includes one or more of the following—rapid pace of speech, verbal junk, or non-contiguous details.
- Telephone greetings can invite a quality message by asking callers to speak slowly, state phone number twice, leave only vital details as well as a best time for a return call.
- Business professionals should check their voice mail messages once an hour and return each one with a phone call.

### **The Art of Telephone Therapy**

One of the most frustrating tasks I undertook during my twenty-plus years in customer service management was quantifying customer service behaviors. How and why were some behaviors better than others? Some things just seemed right in the world of customer service. I was not always able to prove why – that was just the way it was.

I urged agents in my employ for years to allow an upset customer to vent. My directive was based on what I had learned during years of handling challenging telephone calls. "Venting is therapeutic," I would say. "Customers will feel better and be easier to handle when you give them time to work off some of their steam," I added. In one call after another using this tactic, an upset customer would eventually be transformed into someone who was both accommodating and reasonable. How? By employing good, old-fashioned "telephone therapy."

Ask a good telephone service professional if they view their position as similar to a counselor or therapist and the answer will be a resounding "Yes!" Anyone who has handled customer telephone calls for any length of time will understand that the role of service professional and therapist are analogous. Then it happened.

*The Journal of the American Medical Association* published an elaborate study on the benefits of psychotherapy using the telephone. A psychiatrist at the Group Health Cooperative in Seattle reported that 80% of patients who received telephone therapy along with antidepressants indicated that their depression was "much improved" six months later, compared to 55% of those who received medication alone.

The inception of the telephone therapy study was in response to the increasing number of patients who failed to maintain their in-person counseling sessions long enough to detect any benefits. One out of every four patients attending in-person psychotherapy dropout after just one session; fully half would cease treatment altogether by the fourth session. A psychiatrist responded to this trend by contacting their patients by telephone to find out whether that method made it easier for them to continue with their treatment sessions. It did. The resulting telephone therapy study provided clinical proof about something that I have known intrinsically for decades.

What makes the telephone such a powerful therapy tool? I believe it is the amount of imaging that a good telephone voice is able to convey. 80% of what a telephone service professional conveys is in his or her tone of voice. The content or words comprise the remaining 20%. The tone of voice reveals much about an individual, their intent, and their demeanor.

### ***Five Key Attributes***

Customers hear five key attributes in the voice of a service professional. These attributes are vitally important as they encompass 80% of the telephone presentation. The following information is conveyed over the telephone when an astute service person speaks professionally:

- **Health** – A customer hears energy, enthusiasm, and involvement.
- **Assertiveness** – A customer hears diligence and tenacity towards the task at hand.
- **Intellect** – A customer hears whether or not a service professional is knowledgeable.
- **Empathy** – A customer hears whether or not a service professional really cares.
- **Competence** – A customer hears confidence and a "can do" attitude.

These five key attributes work in the favor of a service professional that knows how to leverage them to his or her advantage. They help to alleviate customer concerns and build trust and rapport. However, for the amateur service professional who does not know how to effectively use their tone of voice, the five key attributes look more like this:

- **Health** – A customer hears a lethargic and an uninvolved demeanor.
- **Assertiveness** – A customer hears sloppiness and a weak-willed effort.
- **Intellect** – A customer hears apprehension and uncertainty.
- **Empathy** – A customer hears a monotone voice and apathy.
- **Competence** – A customer hears a timid and “can’t do” attitude.

**Costs Involved:** Service organizations not leveraging their telephone therapy potential are costing their company money. These costs are revealed in the following practices:

**Lost time:** The service manager is forced to interrupt his or her duties in order to assist one of the poorly trained agents.

**Lost margins:** The company is forced to pay for expedited freight charges or make other accommodations to pacify a distressed customer.

**Lost productivity:** The agent is rendered ineffective and unproductive for the balance of the day due to having to absorb angry retorts from a customer who was unhappy with the inappropriate tone of the agent.

It is my firm conviction that the cost of ignorance is far greater than the cost of training. Improve the skills level at your service operations and maximize the ability of your agents to provide therapy over the telephone.

For those service professionals that deal with customers primarily over the phone, courtesy alone is not enough. What you project with your voice can have a powerful effect on the service interaction. The next time that you sense that you are providing therapy to one of your customers, whether it is on the phone or in person, you are.

#### **In Review:**

- Telephone therapy is a proven and effective tool among psychological professionals.
- A service professional’s tone of voice can instill more customer comfort.
- Service organizations that leverage telephone therapy maximize their company’s time, margins, and productivity.

#### **The Dreaded Morning Call**

Call center agents who process a considerable volume of telephone calls know the importance of balancing attitude and aptitude. Working in a call center can be demanding, especially during peak periods. Agents are trained to stay in character and maintain a positive attitude in order to perform at peak aptitude. When an agent becomes unnerved by a difficult or irate customer, their attitude is apt to suffer. When the attitude goes south, the aptitude usually isn’t far behind.

One of the most troubling call center events that I have observed was the result of an early morning call from a displeased customer who apparently had been rehearsing his tirade. I have appropriately designated these events as the “Dreaded Morning Calls.” Consider the following example:

On a sunny Thursday morning, Charles, a customer service representative, arrives at his call center in a terrific mood. Charles has had a good week thus far. He is preoccupied with

thoughts of his upcoming weekend trip to the mountains. Charles begins his day confident that it will be just like any other.

He puts on his telephone headset and instinctively logs into the phone queue. He sees his incoming call LED light up, hears the click in his headset, and then greets his first caller in a perfunctory manner. The caller is quite angry and Charles winces as the customer yells at him.

Charles is startled by the verbal assault and is quickly shaken out of his tranquil mindset. He is not prepared for a confrontation. He attempts to formulate a strategy, but to no avail. Charles is unable to focus his thoughts in a logical fashion. Trying to compose himself, he then inquires of the customer, "May I investigate the matter and call you back in a few minutes?" His hope is that this strategy will afford him enough time to regain his composure, collect his thoughts, look into the matter, and then respond effectively.

However, the customer is adamant in his resolve and replies, "No, I want an immediate resolution!" Charles is at a complete loss and unable to respond. He labors all through the call and thinks to himself, "It's going to be a miserable day!"

In the above example, Charles is struggling with his attitude due to the unforeseen demand of the customer. His deficient attitude also affects his ability to think, work, and prioritize (i.e., his aptitude). This "Dreaded Morning Call" was also stressful to Charles due to what took place inside his body the moment he heard the irate voice of the customer. Prior to answering the telephone call, Charles's metabolism was calm and steady. As soon as he was involved in the conversation with the customer, his metabolic rate surged to a heightened state of alert. This abrupt change negatively affected his attitude and thus diminished his aptitude and ability to carry out his duties as a courteous professional and an astute call representative. The "Dreaded Morning Call" had a profound effect on Charles due to the speed in which his metabolism was transformed from calm to stress.

Charles might handle numerous phone calls during a typical workday. Some are challenging while others are considered routine. As he works, his body's metabolism is adjusting itself to the day's challenges. So if he receives a call from an irate customer sometime around 1:00pm, his metabolism has already been escalating at an incremental rate. His metabolism has already been conditioned by the numerous calls he has already handled. But, first thing in the morning, his metabolism was not conditioned. Thus, Charles found himself either thinking irrationally or, worse yet, not reasoning at all.

It is my experience that call center agents who encounter a "Dreaded Morning Call" usually do not recover or return to their usual level of productivity for the remainder of the business day. Have you ever had a "Dreaded Morning Call?" I have. They have taught me an important lesson about being prepared for the worst that can happen. I advise call center professionals to prepare themselves in advance for "Dreaded Morning Calls" when they arrive at work in the morning. I suggest a ten second adjustment, at which time you consider this question: "Am I ready for a "Dreaded Morning Call?" If the answer is no, then get into character, get serious, and alter your mental frame of mind. Develop a good attitude so that you will be able to perform at peak aptitude.

### **In Review:**

- The “Dreaded Morning Call” from an angry customer can offset a professional’s entire work day.
- Being prepared for Dreaded Morning Calls makes late day angry calls easier.
- It is the sudden upheaval of a service representative’s metabolism that can negatively impact service performance.
- Small, mental preparation at the beginning of the day for the possibility of such a call is a necessary precaution.

### **Fixing the Problem**

While waiting to board a West Coast flight back home to Philadelphia, I listened as the pre-boarding announcement began. These announcements typically include an invitation for frequent fliers to board first, followed by everyone else. However, this announcement was different. Passengers were told that the flight was full and with more than half being frequent fliers, boarding would occur from the back of the plane forward, regardless of flier status.

It wasn’t great news, but as a seasoned traveler I’ve learned to roll with the punches, that is, to remain patient and focused on the final destination - Home.

As boarding began, it soon became obvious that the flight attendants had their hands full. The hustle and bustle of getting passengers seated and their luggage stowed away in a fixed amount of time was a challenge. Almost every passenger had carry-on bags and the overhead storage compartments were filling fast. It didn’t take long for storage space to run out, thereby forcing passengers seated in the front, myself included, to check their luggage.

One passenger in particular became indignant with a female flight attendant when he was informed of the scarce luggage space. The irate passenger looked this flight attendant in the eye, thrust his finger toward her face and yelled, “I can’t believe that you let all of these other people on first, and then you make me check my luggage?”

Everyone within fifteen feet of them stopped to look and listen. The scene quickly fell silent, and it became clear to me that this was what I would have called a “MOMENT OF TRUTH.” I watched with a keen sense of curiosity as the flight attendant nodded emphatically and then informed the passenger in a calm and reassuring manner that she would personally check his baggage. Aware now of the sharp contrast between his tirade and the calm response of the flight attendant, and realizing that he had behaved like a jerk, the previously irate passenger agreed to her offer of personal service.

As a customer service professional, a moment of truth occurs when training and preparation are put to the test. It is a situation when rational thinking, a calm demeanor, and a deliberate response must prevail. Most importantly, you only get one chance to get it right. If the flight attendant had given even a hint of rolling eyes, snippy retaliation, or apathy, then her confrontation with the irate passenger could have escalated. Remaining calm is not easy, but it is achievable with practice and application even during a personal attack.

What causes some customers to behave so badly? It may be that they have been rewarded in the past for their bad behavior with special treatment or immediate service. These customers have learned the cause and effect relationship between their exaggerated behavior and

exclusive accommodation. Some believe that being a customer entitles them to be demanding and condescending. And still others either don't think before they act or they're just plain ignorant.

The challenge for service professionals is to remain calm, think rationally, and to not take things personally when customers imply blame or make their criticism personal. The ability to detach oneself from a situation along with preserving the self-esteem of the customer is a key part of rational thinking – no matter what. The likelihood of a mutually satisfying resolution increases if a service professional can maintain good composure, respond appropriately, and show genuine empathy for the customer. However, once the self-esteem of a customer is damaged with an inappropriate response, the offended party might become defensive or, worse yet, play the victim with even more reason to carry on.

The maxim “the customer is always right” unfortunately has confused some service professionals due to the apparent incongruity between reality and the maxim itself. This confusion might cause a few service professionals to focus on and attempt to fix a customer's behavior. Service professionals must strive to fix problems, not bad behavior. Getting to the root cause of what is causing the customer to behave badly will eventually fix the behavior. Therefore, when a customer is wrong, it's the service professional's primary job to contain the situation so it doesn't get worse. The ability to keep a situation contained takes practice, application, resiliency, and a positive attitude along with a desire to do what is correct.

**In Review:**

- A “MOMENT OF TRUTH” occurs when training and preparation are put to the test.
- Customers may behave badly for a number of reasons—they were rewarded in the past for such behavior, they do not think before they act, ignorance, etc.
- The likelihood of a mutually satisfying resolution increases if the service professional remains calm and responds appropriately.
- Service professionals must strive to fix problems, not bad behavior.

## **Chapter 5: Customer Service Lessons**

In this chapter you will learn how life's lessons can enhance your career. The first section explains that handling upset customers can act as practice in patience, self-control, and level-headedness. The following segment focuses on how strokes of bad luck (such as a car breaking down) can often times be moments for reflection and learning. This transitions into the importance of the upsell in customer service and how a lack of understanding regarding this concept can be detrimental. This chapter concludes with your first and best customer service lesson.

### **When the Job Begins to Get to You**

As a customer service professional, you might speak with scores of customers on a typical workday. Most are pleasant and a few can be difficult, but you tolerate it. A single demanding customer does not push you over the edge. However, each event is cumulative, like a drop of water, they become annoying and bothersome. Nothing you cannot handle, just aggravation. One customer blames you for damage resulting from a rough freight carrier. Another is frustrated about your service policy. Still another customer keeps reciting the same complaint over and over again. Each phone call is like that drop of water in a bucket. Drip. Drip. Drip.

If you experience enough of these incidents, you will eventually have a bucket full of anger. The next challenging customer just might be the one who pushes your anger button and...SPLASH! The bucket spills over, resulting in an emotional torrent. Now you are seeking revenge!

There is no place for anger in customer service. Anger might seem appropriate as a way to even the score against a difficult customer. Yet, once you are able to compose yourself, you realize that you were in the wrong. But, by then, it is too late. You cannot take back angry words that were hurled like darts at your customer.

For an untrained or inexperienced service professional, anger, and revenge fuel each other in a perpetual and escalating cycle. It is best never to get to this point in the first place. Emotional containment is an advantageous starting point. Allow yourself a few seconds to think, before responding during an unpleasant experience. Investing a moment or two in rational thought will spare you much angst and quite possibly save your company money by preventing a loss in productivity.

A service professional must take responsibility for his feelings. Customers do not make service professionals angry. Nor can they make them do or feel anything. A service professional chooses to become angry as a result of what someone else does. They should strive to modify their own behavior since they cannot change that of the customer. It is best to stop placing blame on others for your circumstances and, instead, take personal responsibility for your feelings. If there are problems to resolve, be proactive and fix them. Do not fix the blame.

The fight or flight response manifests itself in interesting ways in customer service. While it is not responsible to fight with or flee from customers, the inability of a service professional to cope with unpleasant circumstances might lead to psychological attempts to do so. Psychological flight manifests itself as apathy or discourteous behavior. This type of conduct creates distance between an agent and their customer and is contrary to the practice of building closer relationships through empathy and genuine concern. Psychological fight might be exhibited as aggressive or retaliatory behavior, which is unacceptable in an industry where it is essential to use restraint rather than retaliation.

A meaningful event stands out in my life when I recall how I consciously started thinking rationally about anger and its effects on me. Late one afternoon I handled a telephone call from a very difficult customer. It was the last call of my workday and I left the office angry and frustrated. I kept replaying the incident in my head while driving home after work. I had blamed that customer for ruining my night. I was barely paying attention to my driving when I reached a sharp curve in the road. I lost control of my car but, fortunately, avoided a crash. The car spun 360-degrees twice before coming to a screeching halt.

As I sat staring at the dashboard, I knew I was wrong for allowing myself to become so angry that I began to think irrationally. The expression “circumstances don’t make a man, they reveal him” certainly rang true to me that evening. I had been exposed as a man who did not properly handle adversity.

The events of that night changed the way I think about and respond to anger. The memory of that night reminds me that I have a choice. These days, I choose to suspend my anger.

You will not improve as an individual or benefit in any way by considering yourself a victim who is at the mercy of the ebb and flow of life. Practice optimism and positive expectancy. You will be rewarded for learning how to suspend your anger. How? Perhaps the biggest benefit is the additional creativity that you will experience. Did you ever notice that your best ideas come when you are the most relaxed? In the world of customer service, formulating creative solutions to customer problems is easiest when you remain calm. Life is so much more fulfilling when you remove anger.

It can help when dealing with angry customers to try to imagine their situation: perhaps they have a sick child, an irresponsible employer, or an overwhelming legal matter. Instead of feeling their anger or frustration wash over you and cloud your ability to do your job, raise your level of professionalism. It will make your job easier and may even help the customer improve their outlook. Raising your level of professionalism is not as difficult as you may think.

### **In Review:**

- There is no place for anger in customer service.
- A service professional must take responsibility for his or her feelings.
- The psychological flight response in customer service may manifest as apathy or discourteous behavior.
- The psychological fight response may manifest as aggressive or retaliatory behavior.
- Staying positive not only avoids unnecessary conflict but can promote positivity and a potential solution to a problem.

### **Making Lemonade, With a Twist**

Every now and then, it helps to be reminded of good, old-fashioned professional service. Can you remember what this is? Among trade professionals, it is service provided by an individual who conveys knowledge and experience, asks the right questions, exceeds expectations, shows appreciation for your patronage, and genuinely enjoys their work. I recently had such an experience.

I was traveling home from a client meeting in a small Pennsylvania city on a hot Monday afternoon in mid-June when I decided to pull into a rest stop on the Northeast Extension of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. I returned to my car after a brief respite only to discover the engine failed to start. I tried the ignition numerous times without success. There I was, stranded at a rest stop, quite conceivably at the mercy of emergency roadside service. Faced with the reality of the situation, I was reconciled with the thought of a very long delay.

With jumper cables stored in the car, I took matters into my own hands. A passerby was more than willing to help me. We connected our batteries using the jumper cables after which I attempted to start my car. Unfortunately for me, we were unable to start the engine. I then asked an attendant at the rest stop gas station if there was an onsite mechanic who could assist me. He replied "No" but he did give me the telephone number of a local mechanic with a suggestion that I call him.

I contacted the telephone number given to me by the gas station attendant and spoke with the owner of the establishment. After describing the known symptoms to him, he asked me two very important qualifying questions: First, "How old is your car?" and, second, "Do you still have your original factory-installed battery?"

In response, I informed him that my car was four years old and that it still had its original factory-installed battery. With a clear sense of authority and certainty, he replied that, in his judgment, the car battery was most likely dead. He informed me that his tow truck driver was out on a call, but that he would place my name next on his service list. I provided him with my cell phone number and was instructed to wait until contacted by his driver.

My background as a service professional led me to conclude that this mechanic understood all about the telephone vocal image. He knew that a person in my situation, that is, someone in need of help, would be put at ease by someone knowledgeable in his field of expertise. His telephone vocal image conveyed a sense of confidence and reassurance. Although I did not know who this individual was, what he looked like, or what type of environment he worked in, based on his voice, I recognized that he was astute, alert, and methodical in his thinking and aware that each telephone call was a business opportunity.

I received a call on my cell phone a few minutes later from the tow truck driver, Ken, who introduced himself in a very polite fashion. He said that he was on his way to pick up a new battery for my car and would then proceed to meet me at the rest stop. Ken asked me about the make, model, color, and location of my car in the parking lot. He asked good qualifying questions that would enable him to do his job. In ten short minutes, a large tow truck arrived. Ken emerged from the cab and again introduced himself to me. He was quite young, very polite, and eager to be of service. His overall demeanor conveyed a sense of respect and appreciation for putting my trust in him. Ken did everything possible to make me believe that my trust in him was well placed. Even though it was I who needed him and his services, Ken made me feel like it was he who needed me. What a concept! He made me, the customer, feel special.

I asked Ken a few questions as he retrieved his toolbox and started replacing my old battery. His answers said much about his character. Ken was 22 years old and had been repairing automobiles for the past six years. He took pride in his work and it showed. He installed the new battery in just a few minutes. As he wrote up my sales receipt, Ken exceeded my expectations by declaring that he was only going to charge me for half the labor rate given that his services were required for such a brief period.

As I continued my trek south, I could not help but think how Ken and his boss turned a seemingly negative situation into a positive experience. Ken finds purpose in his work, he cares about people, and he is a specialist at his job – all the elements of someone with a future as a successful service professional.

Customer service professionals deal with people from all over the globe, at all age levels and economic standings, and in all kinds of situations. In many ways, it is one of the most interesting jobs there are. It all depends on your outlook.

### **In Review:**

- Believe in what you do.
- Be open to learning the skills that you need to be successful in your profession.
- Learn what tools are necessary for your profession, acquire them, and use them properly.
- Hard work and application go a long way. Learn everything you can about the skills you need for your profession.
- Take good care of your work tools and be organized.
- Be prepared. Things can go wrong, but if you are prepared for that, you will deal with it more effectively.
- Be a team player. Your success depends on others.
- Review your work. Take stock of your work at the end of the day and decide on the adjustments you need to make for a smoother and more successful day tomorrow.
- Make plans. See the big picture of what you want your job to become and what steps you can make to bring that about.
- Have goals and dreams and go after them.

### **Don't Forget The Upsell**

My wife was seething, frustrated due to an unpleasant experience at a local food takeout establishment. An hour or so prior to a raucous entry into our home, she had telephoned me as she prepared to leave her office with a suggestion of picking up some takeout fried chicken on the way home. It sounded like a good idea to me.

Our pleasant telephone conversation was in stark contrast to her current behavior. "What happened?" I asked, curious as to what could have caused so much frustration and angst.

My wife then proceeded to describe her exchange with the food takeout store cashier. For starters, the cashier seemed more interested in his conversation with a coworker than in serving customers. Being a person with a genuinely pleasant nature, my wife overlooked his discourteous behavior and proceeded to place an order for twelve pieces of chicken. The cashier quickly rang up the order and held out his hand in a gesture requesting payment even before my wife could request a side dish.

"I'm not finished ordering yet," she said. The cashier responded by rolling his eyes in a gesture expressing inconvenience at what he perceived to be additional work. She continued by ordering side dishes of green beans and rice, and then paused as she considered whether or not to buy biscuits. Again, the cashier quoted the order total and held out his hand for payment

before my wife had an opportunity to order biscuits. Adding biscuits to the order seemed to irritate the cashier even further as it required him to adjust the cash register transaction to undo the previous total. Certain that she was now finished with her order, he again rang up the total, only to be dismayed to learn that my wife also wanted a slice of cheesecake for our son.

As her account unfolded in agonizing detail, all I could think about was the absence of an upsell. Did anyone train the cashiers to ask, "What else may I get for you?"

In my opinion, the absence of upselling is unfortunately pervasive within numerous segments of the business community. It is a skill that I learned as a sixteen-year-old working for a local meat market. My boss taught me several important lessons, among them the characteristics of upselling. He explained to me that if I gave each customer what they intended to buy, then I had not sold them anything. "Making a suggestion to motivate a customer to buy something they did not intend to buy – that was upselling," he instructed.

Opportunities to upsell abound in every segment of business. When executed with courtesy and skill, upselling can add significant revenue to incoming orders. The key to effective upselling is to suggest an item or product complementary to what was ordered. For example, if a customer orders a hamburger from your establishment, it should be natural to recommend fries. Or, should a buyer purchase a shirt at a clothing store, the salesperson might suggest a matching tie. Again, if a client orders a printer from a computer supply outlet, a representative could propose the purchase of ink cartridges. And so on.

It takes time to prepare a list of natural pairings, i.e., products which obviously go together, but it is time well invested. Managers interested in maximizing the upselling potential of their company should create a team of employees assigned with the task of developing product pairings. The likely result will be ideas for pairing never before considered.

A stable infrastructure subsequently should be implemented to enable customer service representatives to suggest other natural pairings. Unfortunately, this is where many upselling initiatives fail. A support infrastructure is required since most customer service representatives will forget to upsell. This is only human nature. During a customer telephone call, a representative tends to focus his attention not on the upsell, but rather on the accuracy of the items ordered, the shipping information, the method of payment, etc. A reminder is therefore essential to prompt a customer service representative to suggest a natural pairing.

From a performance perspective, upselling should never become overbearing or aggressive. The best up sellers do it in such a way so that the customer does not even realize they are being upsold. As in all customer service interactions, the pace, rhythm, and tone of voice play a large part in successful customer communication.

In time, additional and significant revenues from upselling can result from sensible investments in planning and infrastructure.

Smart managers know that upselling is not only important to their business's bottom line, it is also important to the customer's satisfaction through giving the customer the opportunity to make a purchase they want but forgot to order.

Managing your staff and customers to the satisfaction of both is an art and a science. Keep the big picture in mind while dealing with the details. A well-trained staff will not only make your job easier and your customers happy, it will ultimately affect your bottom line in very positive ways.

### **In Review:**

- Your interest and focus should be on the customer during an interaction.
- Upselling is the art of making a suggestion to an already receptive buyer.
- The best service professionals seek a mutual benefit when they upsell.
- The customer should feel 100% satisfied.

### **Your Best Lesson**

Our mothers probably gave us our first and best customer service lesson when they taught us to say, “May I,” “Please,” and “Thank You.” These polite words still work wonders towards building rapport between individuals, setting a positive tone for what will follow after initial contact, and in minimizing adversity. How can something so simple be so profound? The answer is not always obvious. Innovative service organizations have included the “May I,” “Please,” and “Thank You” vernacular into their culture in an effort to differentiate themselves from their competition. Why? This is because too many companies do not inculcate this behavior as a core principle among their employees.

One of my call center clients handles numerous scheduling and logistical tasks for residential construction contractors. The call center agents make thousands of daily calls to homeowners to ascertain a mutually beneficial time and day for an estimator to visit their home. An average homeowner expects construction workers to be rough-necked, blue-collar workers for whom manners and eloquence are secondary. The images that people have about what a construction worker should look and sound like are based on experience or hearsay. These biases sometimes run deep. Yet, I saw this as an opportunity for my construction contractor client to gain a competitive edge and strategic advantage.

My pre-assessment work with this client revealed that their call agents left numerous voicemail messages for homeowners. I noticed when monitoring their phone calls that when a homeowner responded to voicemail messages the agents missed opportunities to be polite and, thereby to differentiate their company from the competition. My monitoring identified agents who were rushing through scheduling options right at the onset of the call. It was clear to me that these agents were more interested in ending their calls in order to move on to the next one. Ending the call in an expeditious fashion was in the best interest of both the agent and his or her team as each was graded on their call center metrics. One of the key metrics was the average handling time (AHT) or the average length of each phone call for that team.

After completing my monitoring assessment work, I suggested that agents start each returned phone message with the phrase, “Thank you for returning my call.” I also suggested that the call agents verify the name of each customer name by asking, “May I please have the correct spelling of your last name?” My suggestions were initially met with both skepticism and opposition because the extra words would increase the time for each phone call. The agents were afraid that the additional conversation would increase their AHT and thereby lower the standing of their team in the call center. I decided as an experiment to time just how long it would take to say, “Thank you for returning my call.” The average result was 1.5 seconds. I then timed the sentence, “May I please have the correct spelling of your last name?” That took approximately 2.5 seconds. Total time: 4 seconds. I then invited the call agents to trust my recommendation and risk adding the 4 seconds to each returned phone call. “If my idea doesn’t work, then just forget it,” I said.

My monitoring surfaced a completely new tone and rhythm to their phone calls after the agents implemented my recommendations. The “May I,” “Please,” and “Thank You” vernacular had a dramatic effect on customer behavior. The infusion of politeness resulted in two findings during my monitoring: The first thing it did was to surprise and delight customers since the communication style of the call agents was unexpected. The surprise was audible. It also helped establish a calm tone and demeanor during the call. The second result was a discernible rise in the flexibility of customers’ schedules that reduced the amount of time it took to agree on a mutually beneficial meeting. *This resulted in a reduction of the AHT for returned calls from customers.*

Companies who are adamant that their employees grasp the importance of the “May I,” “Please,” and “Thank You” vernacular often experience an up-tick in their business. It never ceases to amaze me how surprised clients are with results that are based on simple things that make common sense.

**In Review:**

- Integrating the “May I,” “Please,” and “Thank You,” vernacular into phone calls greatly improves customer experience.
- This vernacular actually decreases average handling time with each customer on the phone.
- Using this positive language can make a company stand out amongst competitors and boost business.

Reference/Customer Service

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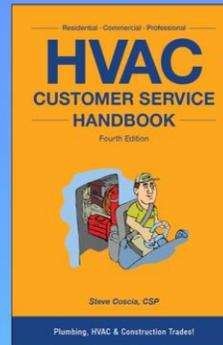
Steve Coscia is one of the most widely published and quoted authorities in trade publications on the topics of customer service and soft skills. Both commercial and residential contractors gain valuable insight from Steve's soft skills seminars.

Steve's frequent television appearances make him the ideal spokesperson for the service industry. A partial list of companies that use his customer service strategies includes Carrier, Bryant, Dell Computer, Motorola and Milwaukee Power Tools.

His Soft Skills Curriculum is taught worldwide at colleges and career centers. Trade Associations such as ACCA, PHCC, SMACNA, AMCO and NPGA host Coscia's speeches and seminars as a benefit to their commercial and residential contractor members.

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