

Excellent Customer Service

It is still important in today's marketplace

by: Robert Doucette, Smart Technologies

Whether we blame the COVID-19 pandemic, the current performance of the economy or the job market, customer service is quickly becoming a dying art. Many businesses prioritize efficiency over the customer experience as technology evolves, leaving customers disconnected and dissatisfied. Despite this growing trend, customer service is critical for business growth and success. By removing the barriers to great customer service, businesses can create lasting relationships with their customers that will ultimately lead to increased revenue and customer loyalty. In this article, I will discuss why customer service matters, a few of its principles, provide ways to remove the barriers to achieving great customer service and how my company, Smart Technologies, keeps it central in our culture.



where customers can quickly access information or purchase a product without speaking to someone in person, it is easy to assume that customer service is no longer relevant. But nothing could be further from the truth. More than 70% of buying experiences are based on how customers feel they are being treated. Customers who receive timely and helpful responses are more likely to return

repeatedly, making customer retention a more cost-effective action than new-customer acquisition. Moreover, excellent customer service shows customers they are valued by the company, making them feel like an important part of their success. It creates trust between businesses and their clients, increasing lifetime value and building stronger relationships.

Some Principles of Customer Service

Now that we have solidified the importance of customer service, let's dig into what it is made of. While several factors play a role in great customer service, mastering the principles below is most critical:

(1) Empathy matters — You and your team should recognize the importance of empathy in customer service; it is worth its weight in gold. Empathy allows employees to understand customers' perspectives, improving the overall customer experience and elevating satisfactory customer service to great customer service. It is an invaluable asset in any successful business. Henry Ford said it best: "If there is any one secret of success, it lies in the ability to get the other person's point of view and see things from his angle as well as your own."

(2) Provide clear and effective communication — When looking to improve your customer service, it is essential to provide clear communication and have a deep understanding of the services that inspire customer trust. Also, the ability to break down complex issues into easy-to-grasp concepts will prevent any confusion or misunderstandings from occurring while ensuring clarity throughout

The Front-Line Employee is Gone

You can see the technological transformations in your neighborhood grocery or home improvement store with the rollout of self-checkout aisles. The changes can be spotted in automated interactive voice response (IVR) phone systems with "Opus Number 1" on-hold music and touch-tone options. With every new day, more and more companies rely on automated solutions for basic customer tasks and workflows. As a result of this shift to digital tools for customer service, the "front-line employee" has gone away.

And who can blame companies for looking to these solutions? Early retirement, low immigration and a pandemic have made a labor market shortfall of 3.5 million — and it shows no signs of slowing down. Just in the last 12 months, there has been a decrease in available customer service positions by 4%. Businesses are left searching for new technologies to fill the human-shaped holes that were occupied just 24 (maybe 36?) months ago.

Does Customer Service Still Matter?

Yes, customer service still matters. In the digital age,

the troubleshooting process. Utilizing positive language when communicating with your customers reinforces efficient problem-solving by focusing on what you can do instead of what cannot be done, allowing for effective solutions that leave little room for frustration.

(3) Responsiveness — In customer service, speed wins. According to customer-experience research firm Forrester, more than 71% of customers think valuing their time should be the top priority for a business in terms of providing good customer service. However, responsiveness in customer service is about finding the right mix. Striking the right harmony between a quick resolution and thorough problem-solving can be tricky, but it is essential to ensuring customers remain satisfied. When your staff focuses solely on response speed without evaluating needs in-depth, overall service quality suffers.

Remove the Barriers to Great Customer Service

Knowing how to provide great customer service does not help a single one of your customers unless you remove the barriers to providing it. Let's dive into some simple actions you and your team can take.

(1) Customer service is reactive; customer experience is proactive — Customer service is a reactive effort to address your customers' immediate inquiries and concerns, while the customer experience is a long-term process designed to create a lasting impression on customers. Both play critical roles in how your customers view your business. Still, by improving your customers' experience, you can anticipate potential challenges they may face and develop proactive strategies for meeting their needs.

(2) Make customer service a business priority — As Jeff Bezos said: "It's our job every day to make every important aspect of the customer experience a little bit better." Customer service should be a top priority for your team, as it is an essential ingredient of success in any industry. To make customer service a core part of your business process, you must create a customer-centric culture from the ground up. This could include setting service standards, training staff members to deliver customer-driven experiences, providing a convenient customer support system, creating customer rewards programs and more.

(3) Trust but verify — You have given your team members the tools to provide great customer service; now is the time to verify they are hitting the mark. To do this, implement customer satisfaction surveys and feedback systems that allow customers to provide assessments of their service experiences directly. Additionally, consider regularly monitoring

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customer interactions for quality assurance and providing customer service training for team members when necessary. Taking these steps will help ensure customer needs are met and their expectations are exceeded.

(4) Align your tools to support human interaction, not replace it — Today's business operators can look around almost every corner and find a tool to optimize or automate a business workflow.

However, you should look to automate with human-centered service in mind. If the workflow process replaces an opportunity to interact with your customer personally, it might not create customer delight.

A great example of leveraging technology that helps — not hinders — creating great customer service is Uber. Uber leveraged technology to disrupt the taxi service industry while maximizing the customer experience by:

- Removing the friction of booking a taxi through traditional methods
- Providing clean vehicles with a pleasant driver experience
- Handling pricing and payment in a clear, transparent way
- Enabling an immediate way to provide customer feedback

Walking the Talk

Providing an exceptional customer experience requires companies to walk the talk. This means putting as much effort into delivering on promises and resolving issues as they do in any other facet of their companies. Here are a few real-world examples of how Smart Technologies keeps delivering great customer service central to our mission and culture:

(1) Face-to-face customer interaction from the start — We make it a priority to start our first interaction with a customer in person. We understand the value and insight we gain by seeing the needs of our customers face-to-face. Throughout the entire Smart Start with our clients, we make sure to keep it a human-centered journey.

(2) Frequent and consistent customer review cadence — A core customer service policy we require our team members to provide for every client is a quarterly one-on-one meeting. This gives us an opportunity to review the solutions we have provided, as well as uncover any opportunities to improve our service. Creating a constant customer feedback loop gives us the data we need to regularly improve.

(3) Responsive support through our Smart Portal — We created Smart Portal to provide a convenient way for our customers to request support or troubleshoot issues with print and document management. Customers can create a ticket in any way that is convenient for them — online, via email or by phone (yes, a direct line to a real-life human).

Our portal also provides innovative tools our support staff can use to provide immediate, responsive support.

(4) Proactive tracking and analytics — Our managed print and document solutions incorporate device and usage tracking to proactively monitor for potential service issues or repairs, minimizing the need for customer-created support requests. This allows our customers to continue their day-to-day workflows without needing to constantly check device health and usage stats.

Wrapping Up

In conclusion, customer service is still a critical factor in business success. Front-line employees may have changed over the years, but the basic principles of customer service remain unchanged and are essential for businesses to build trust with their customers. You and your team members must take steps to remove any barriers that prevent providing

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great customer service by recognizing the importance of a well-trained team, creating systems for efficient communication management, and investing in digital solutions that help you stay connected with your customers. By implementing these strategies, companies can ensure they are walking the talk regarding delivering excellent customer service that continues to delight. ■

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technology and people.

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