

A glowing blue headset with a microphone is centered in the image. The headset has two large, padded ear cups and a flexible boom with a circular microphone. The background is black, and a bright blue soundwave graphic is visible behind the headset. The text "CUSTOMER SERVICE" is written in a bold, blue, sans-serif font, arched over the top of the headset.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Introduction

It goes without saying that without customers, your business – no matter how small or big it is – will not survive. You may manufacture a wonderful product or offer a relevant service, but that will amount to nothing if your customers are let down by an indifferent or poor customer service experience. Look around you and take a closer look at those companies that you love doing business with. Is their customer service one of the reasons you keep going back?





Why You Need to Think About Customer Service

A vibrant, progressive customer service department will help you keep existing customers, attract new ones and grow your business into the future. When creating and developing a customer service department, it is important that everyone understands the importance of good customer service. At a small level, this involves being courteous to customers at all times and hearing their concerns (and praise) for your goods and services. The old adage, 'treat others as you want to be treated yourself', should underpin all customer interactions in your daily business life.

Through your brand values, you should create a customer culture that reflects positively on your business. With good staff who are well trained and understand the brand that they work for, your business should evolve around competent and professional customer service. This can happen by creating a set of customer guidelines: how to answer the telephone or respond to email correspondence, for example, and how to manage customer follow-up or problems so that queries do not fall between the cracks. You could consider creating a customer charter that accompanies every order processed, or which is easily available through your website or social media PR strategy.

Once these guidelines/charter are available, it will be important to communicate them to your staff. A series of ongoing training sessions should help with this, and if necessary external resources could be deployed.





Customer Relationships

'Treat others as you want to be treated yourself'. If this statement underpins your customer service, good customer relationships will follow and your business will prosper. The relationship with the customer is paramount. Always being friendly and courteous towards customers, as well as thanking them for their business, will ensure that repeat business – and good 'word of mouth' – is a possibility. Remember too from our **Building Your Brand** guidelines that with the advent of social media, good and bad news can travel quickly and internationally. It only takes a click of a mouse to upload a comment to Facebook or Twitter about your brand, services or products.

Therefore, to provide the best and most professional customer service, you need to consider the following:

- How do your customers expect to be treated and what are their expectations of your products and services? Are these expectations in line with your branding and PR strategies?
- Do you have a customer service policy/charter and does it cover every aspect of your business?
- How can you improve? At all times, you must utilise previous experience to enhance your service to customers in the future.

Ongoing staff training, as well as analysing what your customers say about your company's products and service, should be the bedrock of enhancing customer service. Online surveys such as Survey Monkey, Trust Pilot and Question Pro can be useful to garner customer intelligence and improve customer relationships.

The foundations for good customer relationships include friendliness, courtesy, understanding, helpfulness and honesty. Be friendly and polite when greeting and interacting with customers in person, as well as developing good phone manner. Be empathetic and demonstrate understanding of your customers' needs. Be helpful, even if this means admitting you can't help or supply their order. In this situations, consider recommending another supplier. Most people will appreciate your honesty and are likely to come back to you for something you can supply.





Understanding Your Customers' Needs

Everyone is different so every customer's expectation will be different too. At the very least, every customer expects you and your staff to know all the basic information about your services and products: cost, duration of contract and service, warranty (if applicable) and the small print in your contracts. If you're operating in retail, you need to know where your stock has been sourced, where it is located in your store and what brands you sell.

The more you know about your service or products, the more the customer will feel confident in dealing with your business.

Building on your brand and the PR strategy employed to communicate with your customers, it is also important to understand what your market is looking for. Besides market research in advance of launching a product or service, you should also record what customers tell you post-purchase: for example, what made them purchase the service or product in the first place. By building a picture of your customer base, you can gain valuable information about their occupations and interests. This intelligence will help you increase business at a future date.

Service-level expectations differ depending on the sector in question. For example, if you are dealing with an investment banker, your service expectations are higher than if you pop into your local forecourt for petrol and bread. It is important to know what your customer expects of your business in your chosen sector.

A 'no frills' approach may work with some businesses including airlines and food retailers, but many companies now seek to offer an extra level of service and surpass customers' expectations. Simply asking 'what more can I do for you' can be the catalyst for repeat business.

And the cardinal rules of customer service? Never lie and never promise something that cannot be delivered ... and always thank customers for their business.





Creating a Customer Service Policy or Approach

Creating a service policy or charter will go a long way to determining the level of service you want to achieve and how you and your staff plan to implement this. It requires planning and direction from management plus buy-in at all staff levels. In essence it is a living, working document, constantly evolving and developing.

Several stages to creating a good, customer service policy/charter include:

- understanding your customer needs and requirements;
- developing a plan to fulfil these requirements;
- training staff as part of your customer commitment and maintaining this into the future;
- ensuring that your training equips your staff to confidently deal with all aspects of customer relationships;
- analysing customer feedback and being aware of changes in the marketplace.





Staff

The quality of your customer service cannot exceed the quality of the people who provide it. Business owners must ensure that their staff are well trained and rewarded for the service they provide. This is why it is important to hire staff who really want to work for you and buy into your brand values. The first point of contact for your customers with your business will usually be someone you employ, so your staff need to:

- be well trained, understanding what is required of them and engaging with ongoing training;
- maintain a positive attitude;
- be happy in their work;
- be empowered to suggest and deliver changes/improvements;
- be ambassadors for the business;
- express appreciation to customers for their business .

Often this engagement commences with the receptionist, whether in person or on the telephone, so it is important that they always engage your customers in a pleasant and meaningful way.

Since the customer comes first, the receptionist and all staff members need to work as a team, respecting requests, comments and complaints from individual customers, and valuing everyone's business (no matter how small or large).





Constantly monitoring your service levels to ensure that all staff are trained and working as a team will help you deliver the service levels required for business; and in this monitoring, you will also quickly realise if you need additional staff or should move staff around within the company.

When you have established your market, defined your brand values, hired staff and set about promoting your company, creating a great customer service mentality across all departments will help the company grow.

Remember that the big money isn't as much in winning customers as in keeping customers – repeat business from your existing customer base is much easier to find rather than new customers. Each customer's perception of your business will determine how well you do this and that perception will be dictated by the level of customer service you provide.





Systems & Processes

How customers purchase from you will determine how your business grows. If the process is painless, then the role of customer service becomes less arduous. However, if the buying experience is complicated or frustrating, they may abandon the purchase, and are unlikely to return. And as mentioned previously, bad news travels fast.

Tips to contribute to a seamless buying process include:

- budget permitting, ensure that you are using the most up-to-date point of sale (POS) and/or electronic point-of-sale (ePOS) software available;
- create staff programmes built on the need for positive customer interaction;
- as part of the hiring process, communicate your employee customer service rewards programme to ensure that staff excel at their work;
- empower staff by encouraging feedback on their role within customer service: ask them for their opinion and suggestions to improve customer service;
- include a customer complaints policy in your customer service charter/policy;
- never hold incorrect data or lose customer-related data. Ensure you have a manageable backup system in place;
- maintain your customer records in a customer relationship management (CRM) database;
- consider introducing a loyalty scheme to reward repeat business from customers.





Complaints

It is good to learn from mistakes, rather than repeat them. Use complaints to your advantage to learn how to better meet customer expectations.

As part of your customer service training, make sure your staff are equipped to deal with a wide range of situations. People on the frontline play the most critical role in your customers' experience. They need to know what to do and say to make that customer's experience a more positive, pleasant one – one that will resolve the situation or issue at hand.

No matter how negative the feedback can be, listen to the customer, understand their complaint, and always tell the customer that the feedback is appreciated, offering a timeline as to how you are going to rectify the situation. Always be realistic and confirm the validity of each concern.

Negative feedback and complaints can illustrate gaps in your service policy. In the long term, they can be harnessed to eliminate failings in the policy and improve the customer buying process. This way, you can continue to build strong, lasting relationships with customers and develop your service.





Measuring Customer Service

Supply and demand: if your sales continue to rise or the business continues to expand, then it is probably correct to assume that your customer service is having a positive effect on sales.

Ask your customers – whether you use hard-copy questionnaires or online feedback forms, ask customers what they think of your products and services, as well as their interaction with your company. You could incentivise the process by offering a prize draw to those that participate.

Customer complaints – if they continue to rise year on year while sales fall or remain stagnant, then this should tell you that your customer service policy isn't working.

'Mystery shopping' – this works in two ways. Firstly, by asking someone to make contact with your staff and ask a set of questions before feeding back the information to you; and secondly, use a similar ploy but contact or visit your competition. You may find that a competitor company is doing something innovative that you can incorporate into your policy.

Internal communication – share good and bad customer news stories with your staff. This is an essential way of training staff. It helps to eliminate the bad processes while emphasising what is good about your customer service policy.

Since your business will only thrive with orders and repeat orders, keeping your customers happy must be one of the primary concerns for your management team and staff. By measuring your customer service, it will help you know if your service level is on par with your stated policy (or your competitors) and where it can be improved. Through these measurements, a manager will quickly obtain an accurate picture of whether the quality of your customer service is where it needs to be or what you need to do to raise the bar on your existing service level.





Customer Service Checklist



Guidelines:

Have you produced documents that clearly state the business' policy for dealing with customers?



Training:

What customer service training have you instigated in your business and how often is it refreshed or updated?



Understanding Needs:

How are you able to evaluate and understand the needs and expectations of your customers?



Systems and Processes:

Do your internal and external systems permit seamless customer engagement?



Complaints:

Have you a written procedure for staff to follow when dealing with customer complaints? How do you incorporate this procedure into the learning process?



Feedback:

How are you obtaining feedback from your customers? How is it being logged and evaluated?





WHO WE ARE



Big Red Book is the largest and longest established Irish company that supplies accounting software to the small business market.

Big Red Book is designed for ease of use so you can spend more time running your business rather than worrying about the accounts.

We understand that doing accounts can be a challenge so we provide free training. We also have an expert customer service team ready to take your call and help you with any support issues.

In addition to Big Red Book accounts software, we also supply an easy to use payroll solution – Big Red Book Payroll. For those companies that want to use a cloud based accounts solution, we offer Big Red Cloud.



With over 20 years' experience providing accounting software and support to over 39,000 Irish businesses, we invite you to join our business community.

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