

# Defining Customer Service

By *Heather Woods*

When I work with small business owners on marketing issues, they invariably state that they provide “excellent customer service” as one of their unique selling points. The benefits of superior service are clear: loyal customers, more sales, and increased market share are among the many gains for businesses with a positive service culture. But what does “excellent customer service” really mean?

A common definition for good customer service is “exceeding customer expectations.” The problem is each customer has his or her own set of expectations regarding how they want their business transactions to be handled and different perceptions of great service.

For example, “We return phone calls promptly” could be a tenet of a customer service plan. However, if you feel that “promptly” means within a day and your customer thinks that “promptly” means within an hour, then you have a breakdown in interpretation between you and your customers.

For a business to truly claim that it provides superior service, it must define what those exceptional services are and continually monitor and measure results to ensure that they are living up to those standards. Developing a Customer Care Plan that delineates how your business will provide good service can help guarantee that your service will exceed your customers’ expectations.

Where do you start to incorporate a Customer Care Plan? First you should assess the current perceptions of your business’s customer service, both from the outside and the inside. Survey your current customers for their observations,

opinions, and suggestions. You need to know what your customers really want. Ask your employees for their impressions and perceptions, and encourage them to buy into the customer care principles.

Next, look at your operation. Look at each stage of your process and the customer’s experience at each contact with your business. Try to identify both your strengths and your weaknesses. Assess what your competition is doing by “mystery shopping” them to see how they treat their customers. Benchmark against your competition and identify their best practices.

Now you’re ready to work with your staff to develop your Customer Care Plan and your action plan for improvement. Your plan can be as formal or as informal as you need but the important part is to define what you are going to do, who is going to do it, and how you are going to monitor what is being done.

Barriers to great customer service include job specialization, arbitrary service policies, and powerless employees. We’ve all heard, “It’s not my job,” or “you’ll have to speak to the manager” during our business transactions. Your Customer Care Plan should help to minimize this customer shuffling. Your employees should be trained to provide solutions rather than barriers to satisfaction. Try to minimize authority levels, and empower your employees to handle complaints directly.

Keys to great customer service include having staff that are caring, patient, attentive, and appreciative. The biggest complaint that customers have is that they are treated rudely by employees and that they are not valued by businesses. Part of your Customer Care Plan should address your hiring practices. Are you hiring employees who are naturally “people persons,” or just “warm bodies?” Invest in training your staff, both in the technical aspects

of the job and in how to provide exceptional service.

Implement your Customer Care Plan and monitor your results. Ways that you can assess your customer service is through the change in the number of comments or complaints, increase or decrease in sales, changes in customer perceptions, and the level of customer turnover. Continue to ask your customers how you are doing, and modify your plan to reflect these perceptions.



Providing exceptional customer service requires more than just stating that you have it. Developing a Customer Care Plan helps ensure that you deliver what your customers expect every time.

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*Funded in part through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Small Business Administration. All opinions, conclusions, or recommendations expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the SBA.*