

Careers in Customer Service

Steven R. Van Hook, PhD

Employment Trends

The good news is the demand for skilled customer service representatives is expected to grow at a healthy rate through the first decades of the twenty-first century, powered by the numbers of products and services that demand customer support. The bad news is the job market will be highly competitive, and you will have to be as good at serving *yourself* with skill development as you are at serving customers to rise through the ranks.

Here are some interesting projections, courtesy of the Bureau of Labor Statistics *Occupational Outlook Handbook*:

- Employers hiring customer service workers will typically be expecting at least a high school diploma.
- Some of the characteristics common in successful customer service workers are strong skills in communications and communication technology, interpersonal relations, problem-solving, and all encompassed by lots of patience.
- Some of the larger employers of customer service workers include administrative and support services (15%), retail trade (11%), credit activities (9%), wholesale trade (8%), and insurance carriers (7%).

- Customer service workers may require special licenses to answer questions about insurance or financial services. Typically these licenses require passing a written exam, with preparation often provided by the employer.
- The median hourly wage of customer service workers is around \$14.64 per hour (as of 2010) in the United States, earning fulltime pay of some \$30,500 per year.

For much more detail on the outlook for customer service workers, including job prospects, qualifications necessary, working conditions, pay, and so forth, visit the [BLS Marketing Career Outlook](#) pages regarding *customer service representatives*. As you review the *BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook*, you may benefit by researching retail, marketing, social work, and similar fields, drawing upon your abilities in communications, sales, training, technical support, and related interests.

BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook: <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/>

Saylor URL: www.saylor.org/cust105#4.2

As you advance in a customer service position, you may be looking to grow into other related professions. Please spend 1.5 hours touring the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* career information in occupation groups and subcategories of:

Retail

- Sales Agents
- Cashiers
- Information Clerks

Management

- Advertising, Promotions, and Marketing
- Public Relations Specialists
- Sales Managers
- Training and Development

Community & Social Service

- Health Educators
- Social and Human Service Assistants
- Social Workers

Twenty-First Century Job Skills

While it is hard to predict with certainty the rapid technological innovations for decades to come, we can be sure the workplace and requisite skills will be in constant flux. Yet, there are fundamental abilities that are certain to be essential now and in the years to come. These skills include an ability to thrive in a global workplace, communicate across multiple cultures, manage diverse international teams, and employ communication technologies to coordinate networked teams in decentralized settings.

Google's "Project Oxygen" conducted extensive data-mining on the company's best international managers and identified eight characteristics of its most effective leaders. These are traits you might work to develop in yourself, if you hope to rise into top positions within your own field and organizations:

- 1) Be a good coach, providing supportive suggestions to your workers, along with any criticisms.
- 2) Empower your team, rather than micromanaging and usurping team members' individual initiative.
- 3) Express interest in your workers' well-being, and get to know them as people and families apart from the workplace.
- 4) Be results-oriented, motivating your team towards success with a focus on removing obstacles to productivity.
- 5) Be a good communicator and listener, and be responsive to the team's concerns.
- 6) Help your workers with career development, using the same tools that have helped your own career to advance.
- 7) Have a clear vision, and keep the team moving forward towards shared goals.
- 8) Keep your technical skills sharp, so you can demonstrate rather than just direct.

Wisdom of Successful Leaders

The best lessons on how to achieve success frequently do not come from textbooks but from the mouths of those actually doing it. Not long ago, *The New York Times* conducted interviews with chief executives on the qualities most essential for achieving success, both as a worker and a leader. The five most critical X-factors, along with quoted CEO perspectives, are:

- 1) Passionate curiosity: the best CEOs are not always the smartest but are typically the best learners.
- 2) Battle-hardened confidence: “Tell me what adversity you faced, what you did about it, what did you learn ... the people I hire fall down, dust themselves off, and keep fighting the next day.” – Nancy McKinstry, CEO of Wolters Kluwer
- 3) Team smarts: “More than talent, I most need people who can build a team, manage a team, recruit well, and work with their peers.” – Susan Lyne, Chairman, Gilt Groupe
- 4) A simple mind-set: “Be concise, get to the point, make it simple. Bosses are not impressed with complexity.” – Adam Bryant
- 5) Fearlessness: “I have to have people who aren’t afraid of change but have an appetite for it.” – Mindy Grossman, CEO of HSN

Summary:

- Career opportunities in marketing and related fields should remain solid, but practitioners must be prepared for stiff competition.
- The Bureau of Labor Statistics *Occupational Outlook Handbook* provides extensive information on careers, using related skills in fields of communications, research, management, entertainment, public outreach and education, etc.
- Among the traits helping managers and teams to succeed are the abilities to be a good coach, empower the team, support workers' well-being, focus on results, communicate and listen well, encourage career development, provide a clear vision, and keep skills sharp.
- The most successful leaders have a passionate curiosity, confidence, team smarts, a simple mind-set, and fearlessness.

Next Unit: Customer Service Career Development

Customer Service Career Development

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Employment Resources

There is no shortage of avenues to job postings. The problem is to compete against the incoming flood of applications and resumes from dozens or even hundreds of others who aspire to be employed in the same position. This is especially true of job openings posted in local media. Of course, the more specialized and developed the skills you have to offer, then the better chance you have of standing out in the stack.

Another tactic is to sidestep the typical employment process and connect directly with the decision-makers who may help you navigate the help-wanted labyrinth, or—given the right set of circumstances—even create a position just to match your specialized abilities.

First, you may want to do a scan of the sorts of companies and positions seeking what you have to offer. Here are a few sample employment boards to investigate:

Career Builder: <http://www.careerbuilder.com>

Indeed: <http://www.indeed.com>

Monster: <http://www.monster.com/>

Spend an hour or so visiting these jobs pages; perform a search for *customer service* positions; and get an idea of the sorts of positions available, what companies are hiring, what skills they seek, and where they are located. You may even post your resume and apply for positions, but try not to get overwhelmed or discouraged by the process.

Another tactic is to attempt to develop a relationship with a manager, vice president, or other well-placed contact in a desired company or organization. Research everything you can: what is the company's history? Where did your contact go to school, what have they written, and what projects have tackled? Write your contact a message expressing interest in his or her works, ask questions about his or her success, and request advice. You are not looking for a job at this point, but you are looking to build a relationship. It is even better if the company has no job openings, because you are not competing against anyone. When an opening comes along, you may have established a relationship with a key contact, and he or she may be happier to hire someone he or she already knows.

An important item to keep in mind about employers and hiring is they are likely to be as apprehensive about the selection process as you are. They are putting themselves on the line with their hiring decision, especially for a position so out-front as a customer service representative. They are inviting a stranger into their home, and that is just plain scary.

It is much easier to hire someone than it is to get rid of them.

Appreciate their apprehensions, and try to shine as you attempt to assuage their own concerns with reasons why you are the perfect fit (if indeed you are).

Internships

Internships are a valuable tool for career development. They allow you to learn valuable skills while putting them to practical use in the field, to demonstrate your abilities in a low-stake position while making useful connections, and to decide if it is really the kind of work you want to dedicate your life to anyway. There are many examples of well-known and successful former-interns, including Bill Gates and Oprah Winfrey.

Most job boards will allow you to search for *internship* positions. Many company websites will announce internship opportunities. You can also offer yourself as an intern directly to a key contact within an organization. There are some websites that specialize in connecting applicants with internship openings, such as InternshipPrograms.com. On the website below, spend an hour researching for internship opportunities by field (e.g. marketing), employer, and location.

Internship Programs: <http://www.internshipprograms.com/>

As you arrange your internship position, there are a number of useful tips you might keep in mind:

- **Negotiate a good title for your resume:** for example, rather than intern, try customer service program coordinator, technical support developer, or such.
- **Investigate if the field is a good career fit:** check the company out, while the company is considering you. Is this what you want to dedicate your life to?
- **Develop industry and company connections:** the most valuable payoff is the people you meet, the references you gain, and the leads you get.
- **Be low maintenance, observe, and contribute:** many managers may dislike interns; interns sometimes take more work to manage than they give. Don't do that.
- **Treat it as a real job:** always give your best; you never know who is watching.
- **Volunteer for a non-profit:** it can be more interesting work, offering a greater diversity of assignments and having less pressure to generate revenues.

International Careers

All the above suggestions and resources apply to a career in the global marketplace as well, especially if you can bring multilingual and cross-cultural skills to the table. Beyond the regular abilities required for a position in any field, you may be able to expand your resume offerings in critical ways: do you speak a second or third language? Do you have overseas experience? Do you have an especially suitable background (e.g. language skills plus specialized technical training)? Have you worked with international multicultural customers and employees?

The database below provides contact information for a number of international organizations, as well as links to their *about* and *employment* pages. This resource is especially useful for those who hope to apply their communication and technical skills to government work, social marketing, and development programs. Please spend an hour scanning through the database entries on each organization, its mission, and its geographical range of activity.

Database of Transnational Organizations: <http://wwmr.us/support/transorgs/transorgs.html>

Summary:

- There are many employment boards (e.g. Careerbuilder.com, Monster.com, and Indeed.com) that list job openings and allow resume postings, though it is easy to get overwhelmed and discouraged by the process.
- It is possible to find job openings by connecting directly with key managers and decision-makers within a chosen organization.
- Employers are also apprehensive about the hiring process; strive to become a perfect fit for their needs.
- Internships are a useful opportunity to develop your skills, demonstrate your abilities, develop key contacts, and try out a field to see if it fits.
- International careers can be exciting and fulfilling. To appeal to international employers, develop valuable skills such as foreign language proficiency, cross-cultural abilities, on-site country experience, and project management.

Next Unit: Professional Social Networks

Professional Social Networks

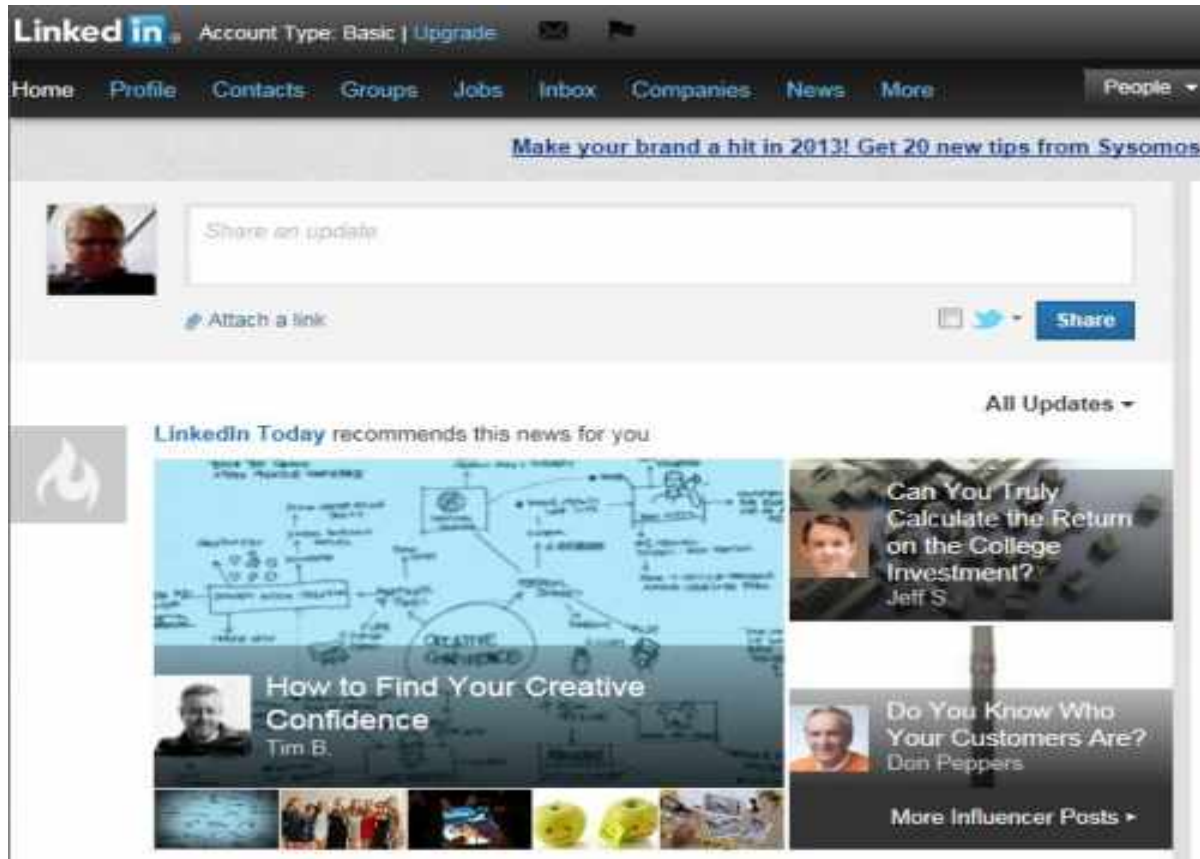
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Customer Service Job Networking and Professional Development

The business world can be challenging to break into, highly competitive, and frequently unforgiving. Fortunately, there are many support systems in place, including social networks that provide a means to share tips, job leads, case studies, and mutual support for colleagues facing common problems. Successful professionals will make use of these resources as well as share their own employment leads, tips, and best practices.

By business networking and postings on social networks, you may also help employers to find and recruit you! Check out the following annotated resources that you may find useful as part of your career development in customer service and related occupations. Please spend some time giving a brief visit to each of these websites, join up if you haven't already, and put their networking power to work on your behalf.

LinkedIn



LinkedIn: <http://www.linkedin.com>

LinkedIn is a free social-networking resource with a primarily business bent. You can connect with other professionals; track your friends and colleagues as they progress in their careers; network for employment opportunities; post a resume in order to help employers to find you; join professional groups in fields such as retailing, technical support, , and other customer service fields; or start a group of your own. You are also able to research company listings, follow their postings for company news and job openings, and gain inside insights into a company's activities and developments. If you only join one social network for your career growth, this should well be it.

Saylor URL: www.saylor.org/cust105#4.2



The Saylor Foundation

Facebook



Facebook: <http://facebook.com>

Facebook is more personal in nature, but it provides many opportunities beyond simply staying in touch with loved ones and posting pictures of your pets. Many companies have Facebook pages which you can *like* and follow their in-house news. You may also develop select circles of friends and colleagues who share employment leads, career tips, training opportunities, and the like.

Twitter



Twitter: <http://twitter.com>

Twitter provides yet another opportunity to follow company news by subscribing to their tweets. Pick an employer you might like to work for, and follow their daily updates for better insights into the company and new directions it may be heading.

Professional Development

Customer service—like most specialized fields in business and public affairs—requires a high degree of interpersonal interactions and social skills. As you network with other jobseekers and colleagues in your networks, you may find some useful tips, and even share some of your own. The following suggestions may help with stressful situations of customer interactions, staff meetings, presentations, and just small-talk schmoozing at office parties.

- If you have a difficult time with public speaking or interpersonal interactions, you may want to find a Toastmaster's organization near you for some low-stress and supportive practice.
- When preparing for job interviews and performance evaluations, expect hard questions and draft out your responses in advance—especially for the questions you may not want to answer.
- Do not be afraid to admit that you do not know the answer to a question; instead, offer to find the answer and get back to the asker as soon as possible.
- Do not rush when answering any questions. Do not feel obliged to fill the quiet after a tricky question. Just pause, think, and then answer.

- Always dress your part, projecting a cool, clean-cut professional image. Dress up or down as the circumstance dictates.
- Project enthusiasm for your ideas and goals. That attitude is contagious. Remember that if you are not excited about yourself, then the listener never will be.
- Do not be untruthful, but also do not feel the need to be hurtful. Do not say someone looks unwell, sick, or tired. This will do nothing to further conversation and only make the person uncomfortable. Remember silence is an option.

Personal development guru Dale Carnegie had many best tips for effective human relations in the art of “how to win friends and influence people” including:

- “You can make more friends in two months by becoming really interested in other people than you can in two years by getting other people interested in you.”
- People typically respond very badly to criticism, even if it is of someone else, so “speak ill of no one and speak all the good you know of everyone.”
- People yearn to be appreciated, so always keep a “thank you” on your lips.
- “Arouse in others an eager want,” or just talk about what it is that they desire, and find ways you can help them to achieve it.

Summary:

- There are a number of networking resources worth visiting that help the job seekers engage in exchanges of information, leads, and mutual support.
- Social networks such as LinkedIn allow us to post resumes, join online professional groups, and help potential employers find us.
- Customer service success requires a high-degree of interpersonal skills such as simple but enthusiastic presentation, advanced preparation of information, and sensitivity to the needs of others.
- Key methods to connecting well with people are to demonstrate interest in others, express appreciation, and seek ways to help them better their lives.