

Understanding the Customer

Steven R. Van Hook, PhD

What the Customer Wants

Perhaps the most effective way to find out what customers want is simply to ask them. Customers have been asked in surveys what it is they're looking for, and their responses are not surprising. The primary response from customers is they want to receive polite, helpful service. They aren't expecting extra special treatment, or to be overwhelmed with multiple offers of assistance—in fact, some customers may find excessive attention to be intrusive or offensive.

But they do say they want to feel appreciated as a customer, and they want a pleasant attitude from their service provider, even if it may not necessarily be sincere. What does send them out the door to a competitor is an attitude of indifference. Or even worse, is when a customer may be treated with hostility from a worker who may have had a hard day, and is taking it out on a frustrated or angry customer.

A customer typically wants to complete a transaction as quickly as possible, minimizing the amount of time and energy it takes to serve a need or resolve a problem. Towards that end, you may look at the customer more as your partner in the transaction: how may we best help one another accomplish our immediate goal, so we can get to the next thing to do on our list.

Of course, some customers may be wanting more from an interaction; perhaps they live alone and you are their only human connection that day. In that case, to the extent possible, if you are able to offer an extra bit of time to the contact, you may not only gain a loyal customer, but may also help a lonely person live just a bit happier. If you follow the model of *listen*, *empathize*, and *take control*, there is often some room to connect with a customer a little beyond the call of duty, before you slip into the control mode to complete the interaction.

It may well be a supervisor is watching your interaction with a customer. At some point, you can be sure someone is observing and assessing your performance. Even though there will always be pressure to accomplish as much as possible with a reasonable amount of time, a good supervisor should appreciate your dedication to excellent customer service, and you will be recognized for your commitment to the customer as well as to the success of your company. By committing yourself to the best service you can provide within the constraints of your position, you may ultimately be recognized both professionally and personally.

What the Customer Needs

Along with understanding what a customer *wants*, it also is important to address what it is a customer *needs*. Quite often customers aren't sure exactly what they need to do, only that they have a problem; so it is your job to help find a resolution to their situation. It may be they simply need to better understand the service or product they have bought (or will buy). In that case, they may need to be educated with a simple and clear explanation.

Other times a customer may need to have a defective item replaced with one that works or better suits their particular demands. If you understand the needs of your customers and the offerings of your company, this is usually an easy fix.

Or sometimes the customer may simply need to return an item or cancel a service. If you handle this need well, they may purchase a replacement item right then, or return later since you've won their loyalty with considerate service.

As a customer service worker, it is your job to help your customers find the solutions that best serves their needs, clearly explain the options, honestly make a best recommendation, and then have you take control to implement an agreed upon action. Handled rightly, everyone becomes a winner.

Serving a Customer's Needs and Wants

It is up to you as a service professional to understand the needs of your customers, the particulars of your company's services or products, the options you may be able to present to your customer. Keep a focus on what you are *able* to do for your customer (rather than what you *can't* do). Assume ownership of the customer's needs or problem. Be clear and specific as you ask questions and make suggestions. Offer a clear resolution to the problem. Keep the interaction cordial and respectful. Make sure your customers feel respected and appreciated for bringing you their business.

There is a saying: before I care what you *know*, I want to know that you *care*. Once customers feel you are on their side and that your mission is to help them find satisfaction, your job is half way done.

Summary:

- Most customers say they simply want polite and helpful service.
- A good customer service strategy is to work with them as a partner to complete a transaction quickly, smoothly, and satisfactorily.
- Some customers may need a little more attention to satisfy their particular needs.
- You may never know when you are being observed by a supervisor. The best practice is to always give you top effort to create a satisfied customer.
- A customer service worker also must help identify a customer's needs, even if the customer is not sure of them.
- Customer needs might include explanations on how a product or service works; replacement of a product; and return or cancellation of a product or service.
- A good customer service worker assumes ownership of a customer's issue until it is resolved.