



What is Customer Service?

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Too often, customer service is viewed as a department, a designated employee's job, or someone else's responsibility. Because of this limited view of customer service, many employees are content to simply execute a series of mandatory job functions until the end of their shifts—blissfully unaware of the myriad opportunities forfeited to make lasting positive impressions on their customers.

To expand on this narrow definition of customer service, I'd like to submit my own definition for consideration:

Customer service is a voluntary act that demonstrates a genuine desire to satisfy, if not delight, a customer. Within this short definition, there are seven specific words, or elements, that I suggest we explore further:

1. Voluntary: Providing exceptional customer service, unlike executing mandatory job functions for which an employee is paid, is always voluntary.

I recall once saying this to a client who disputed my claim. Upon hearing it, his smile faded and his eyes narrowed as he leaned forward across the conference table. His voice took on a Dirty Harry tone as he retorted: “Not around here! In my building, exceptional customer service is mandatory!”

I disagreed but, in his defense, most general managers would say the same thing: “Of course exceptional customer service is not optional. We don’t permit employees to provide substandard customer service!” In theory, they’re right. But in practice, they’re kidding themselves.

The reason that you and I as customers rarely experience the “exceptional” customer service that these business leaders claim is mandatory is because it’s optional. An employee chooses to pay attention to detail, to display a sense of urgency, or to go the extra mile. An employee chooses to make eye contact, smile, or add enthusiasm to her voice.

It's voluntary. It's elective. It's discretionary. This explains why you will most certainly succeed in shipping a parcel at your local post office but may or may not receive exceptional customer service from the postal employee. Weighing a package is mandatory. Smiling isn't.

2. Act: Service is a verb. As such, it requires action. Without initiative, one's readiness and ability to initiate action, there is no exceptional customer service.

It's the difference between a retail clerk who, after completing a transaction, offers the ubiquitous industry farewell, "Your receipt's in the bag" compared to an engaged clerk who notices (verb) the customer's well-mannered children and offers (verb) a sincere and specific compliment about their behavior. Both noticing the children's behavior and choosing to compliment it require the clerk to be an active participant in an exchange rather than a passive observer of a transaction. It requires that the clerk view service as a verb, exercise initiative in the moment of choice, and take deliberate action to create a lasting positive impression.

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3. Demonstrates: Exceptional customer service reflects job essence, an employee's highest priority at work.

All job roles are made up of two parts: job function (the duties and tasks associated with one's job role) and job essence (an employee's purpose or highest priority at work). For most service industry employees, their highest priority at work is to create delighted customers.

A great majority of employees (and the managers who oversee their work) acknowledge only the first part: job function (knowing what to do and how to do it). As a result, job essence (knowing why they are doing it) is often left to chance. This explains why so many employees describe their jobs as “boring” and “monotonous” and why so many customers describe the service they receive as “lifeless” and “transactional.”

Rather than only displaying competency (job knowledge and skills) while executing their job functions at work, in order to make lasting positive impressions on customers, employees must demonstrate a connection to the organization's mission (job purpose) by reflecting job essence—their highest priority at work: to create delighted customers.

It doesn't have to be a big thing. The other day, as a local coffee shop barista served my espresso, she pleasantly surprised me by pairing it with a complimentary 4 oz. glass of chilled sparkling water, saying with a smile, “Here. This will cleanse your palate.”

Preparing and serving the espresso are examples of executing job function, but offering the sparkling water demonstrates job essence. And the gesture didn't go unnoticed. To me, it made the difference between an ordinary transaction (that I could get anywhere) and an extraordinary experience (that I can only get at the Coffee Place Neighborhood Café) that resulted in a lasting positive impression.

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4. Genuine: There's no place for duplicity or phoniness in the delivery of exceptional customer service.

You must express genuine interest, offer sincere and specific compliments, and convey authentic enthusiasm. Exceptional customer service is never predicated on superficiality or disingenuousness. If a service provider's smile reverts to an indifferent expression the moment a customer turns away, that demonstrates duplicity.

And there's no place for duplicity or phoniness when serving customers. Exceptional customer service is not about masking your true feelings. It's about actualizing them.

5. **Desire:** **Employees must want to provide exceptional customer service. Exceptional customer service doesn't happen by chance. It happens by choice.**

Years ago I read an outstanding book, *The Enthusiastic Employee* by David Sirota. In it, an enthusiastic workforce is defined as one whose needs are met for equity, achievement, and camaraderie. This definition emerged from years of research with millions of employees and provides insight into the levers that will influence an employee's desire to perform.

Essentially, when management treats workers in a respectful and dignified manner (equity), encourages employees to find innovative ways to do things (achievement), and creates a work environment where employees have a sense of belonging (camaraderie), the conditions are right to influence one's desire to provide exceptional customer service.

I once worked for a highly successful hotel general manager who made it a point to learn every one of his 200+ employees' names, sending each a handwritten birthday card (equity), and displayed every employee's framed photo, along with their name and department, in the cafeteria in order to foster a sense that we were "all one team" (camaraderie).

He also actively encouraged employee innovation that led to one housekeeper modifying her vacuum by placing a magnetic strip on the front of the unit to capture metal debris, like paper clips and earring stoppers, before it could damage the machine (achievement).

And this was 15 years before Mr. Sirota wrote his book!

You can't force employees to want to deliver exceptional customer service any more than you can coerce customers to be loyal. But you can shape an environment that fosters both.

6. Delight: Employees decide for themselves whether or not to expend the discretionary effort required to elevate a customer service experience from satisfactory (ordinary) to delightful (extraordinary).

I'm not referring to a Herculean effort, whereby employees breathlessly run from one dramatic customer service encounter to the next—either to exceed customer expectations or to compensate for flawed service models. Not only are these actions unsustainable, they're not required to deliver exceptional customer service.

The employees who consistently shine in the eyes of customers are those who willingly expend discretionary effort in the moment of choice.

They do the little things that, collectively, make a big difference:

- Rather than passing a customer without acknowledging her, these employees make eye contact, smile, and offer an appropriate greeting.
- Instead of ignoring the stray cup in the parking lot or the candy wrapper in the corridor, these employees pick up debris and properly dispose of it.
- As opposed to robotically going through the motions while processing the next transaction, these employees express genuine interest in customers and convey authentic enthusiasm for serving them.

Cynical employees will mock these examples, ascribing them to naïve employees or “goody-goodies” who’ve yet to learn how to get paid for doing the bare minimum. That’s okay because the “goody-goodies” have a plan. They’re the ones who recognize that their extra effort will be rewarded with increased tips, better shifts, and eventual promotions to positions of greater responsibility. The difference between ordinary and extraordinary really is that little “extra.”

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7. **Customer:** Customers are our highest priority at work and the ultimate basis for our employment.

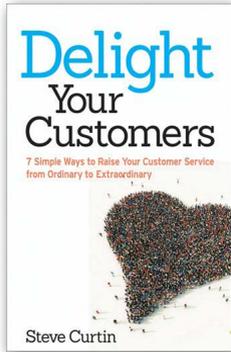
Peter Drucker, the father of modern management, said, “The purpose of a business is to create and keep a customer.” And he was right. However, I would like to expand on his observation by adding, “The purpose of a business is to create a customer who keeps creating more customers.”

The consulting firm Bain & Company refers to these customers as promoters. Promoters are customers who are less price-sensitive, have higher repurchase rates, and are responsible for eighty to ninety percent of the positive word-of-mouth about a company or brand. Companies with the highest percentage of promoters, according to Bain & Company research, typically grew revenues at more than twice the rate of their competitors.

So the key, then, is to increase the percentage of your customers who are promoters. This starts by developing a customer-focused service culture that attracts and retains loyal employees and customers. And while every company’s service culture is unique, one aspect that is constant among world-class customer service providers is this: They understand that without customers, there is no business.

What is your definition of customer service? If you don't have one at your place of business, consider scheduling the development of a definition as a group activity at your next department meeting. Put your staff at ease by reminding them that there is no single correct definition of customer service. Whatever you come up with together will be just right for your work group. **And you will be raising awareness about the topic of customer service, which—besides actually serving customers—may be the best use of your time at work.** 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Steve Curtin has 20 years of experience between hotel operations, sales and marketing, training and development, and customer service roles working for Marriott International, one of the premiere customer-focused companies in the world. Steve is an accredited member of the National Speakers Association. Since 1992, he has delivered interactive and engaging presentations on three continents, in six countries, and 26 states, and has delivered over 600 presentations to more than 20,000 people. Learn more at [stevecurtin.com](#).

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