MENDOCINO COUNTY

CUSTOMER SERVICE

GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

Formed by the Mendocino County Executive Leadership Team, the Customer Service team is pleased to offer this Customer Service Guide.

Effective customer service is essential for success in organizations private or public. Organizations depend on employees who can effectively communicate with customers, meet their needs, and resolve their concerns. Most organizations place such a high value on customer service that they include provisions for it in their mission statements and establish guidelines and strategies for achieving it.

Purpose

The purpose of this Guide is to introduce customer service guidelines and techniques by presenting you with *general information* covering this subject area. These techniques serve as a useful foundation for approaching most customer service interactions and may be adapted as needed to ensure continuous customer satisfaction.

Objective

This Customer Service Information Guide has been designed to help you:

- Understand our definition of customer service.
- Communicate effectively with customers – whether external or internal.
- Provide customer service in various types of interactions.
- Resolve customer concerns.
- Understand and respond to cultural differences among your customers.

Disclaimer

This Guide provides an introduction to this subject matter only; further study of this subject and related concepts may be necessary to gain the understanding needed to achieve your learning and/or career goals. Although this Guide presents useful and practical information from this subject area, there is no guarantee that someone who reads it will be able to perform better on the job or on a County examination. By merely using this Guide, you consent to understanding and agreeing with this disclaimer.

Who Should Use This Guide?

Because this Guide covers *fundamental* customer service techniques, it can be useful for anyone who helps others resolve concerns at work. However, there may be specific customer service techniques that apply to your particular work setting (e.g., public safety, health and social services, information technology, etc.) that this Guide will not address.

OUR DEFINITION OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

There are many different ways to define customer service. To establish a common reference, this Guide will use the following definition:

> **Customer service** is meeting the needs of customers dependably and accurately, in a manner that is timely, responsive, courteous, proactive, and sensitive to the customers' needs; projects competence; and builds relationships of trust and mutual respect.

Customers are **any** individuals whose concerns you help to resolve. They include members of the public (external customers) and individuals within your organization (internal customers). Consider the following examples:

Examples of External Customers	Examples of Internal Customers
• Clients • Patients • Applicants	• Supervisors • Co-workers • Support Staff

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Throughout this Guide, the general term "customer" will refer to both external and internal customers.

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY

Effective customer service begins with effective communication. Understanding customers' concern(s) by asking appropriate questions, actively listening, and responding appropriately will help them feel valued and likely enhance their level of satisfaction with the service you provide. This section will cover some of the important communication techniques needed to provide effective customer service.

Asking Appropriate Questions

To communicate with customers effectively, it is important you *must* first ask appropriate questions to fully understand their concern(s). This not only provides you with useful information, but it also builds customers' trust in your ability to assist them. There are two types of questions you can ask:

Open-ended questions

Open-ended questions encourage customers to give a complete response in their own words. Open-ended questions typically begin with words such as "What" and "How," which require customers to give more than a single-word response. This type of question is useful at the beginning of a conversation because it allows customers to express their concerns and can help you to formulate more detailed, targeted follow-up questions, if necessary.

Close-ended questions

Close-ended questions encourage customers to give a short or single word response. This type of question provides an efficient way for you to gather information quickly. However, use close-ended questions sparingly because too many can make the interaction seem cold and impersonal. The tables below provide examples of open-ended and close-ended questions:

Open-Ended Questions	Close-Ended Questions
• How may I help you? • What information do you need? • Can you describe what happened? • What happened next?	• Is this your correct address? • What day is the form due? • Did you receive the paperwork? • Do you have access to the Internet?

These examples illustrate how you can use open-ended questions to give customers an opportunity to talk about their concerns and use close-ended questions to obtain or clarify specific information. You will likely use a combination of open- and close-ended questions when providing customer service. When used properly, both types of questions can be useful to obtain the information you need to identify customers' concern(s) and determine what your next steps will be in order to help them.

Listening to your Customer

After asking a question, carefully listen to your customers' responses so that you can better understand their concern(s). Effective listening involves more than just hearing what customers say; you must show your customers that you are listening to them. The following are some techniques you can use to effectively listen to a customer's concern(s).

Techniques to help you listen to your customer:

- **Focus** on what your customer is saying and take notes, if necessary.
- **Avoid** performing other work so that you can give your complete attention to your customer.
- **Be Aware** of the signals your customer sends through his/her body language and tone of voice.

Techniques to show that you are listening:

- **Respond** only after your customer has finished speaking, even if you think you know what he/she will say or have heard similar concerns from other customers.
- **Paraphrase** what your customer says by repeating the information back to your customer in your own words. After paraphrasing, ask your customer if you understood the concern(s) correctly.
- **Ask** follow-up questions if you are unsure about something your customer says or to gain more detailed information regarding his/her concern(s).

Listening effectively to customers will help you build a relationship of trust with them and determine the best course of action to respond to and resolve their concerns. At times, those who provide customer service may skip asking appropriate questions or listening in order to provide faster service. While providing assistance in a timely manner is part of effective customer service, it should not be at the expense of providing accurate information or performing actions to build rapport with customers.

Responding to your Customer

Once you understand your customers' concern(s), you can then work to resolve them. The content and delivery of your response can greatly impact the effectiveness of the service you provide. Your response should be:

- **Consistent.** Treat similar issues in a similar manner and do not favor one customer over another.

  Example: *"I can understand why you would like to receive the information right away, but unfortunately it is against policy to discuss this information over the telephone. Your results can only be provided in writing."*

- **Honest and Accurate.** Provide all appropriate facts, inform your customer about possible problems, make promises you know you can honor, and be accountable for your actions.

  Example: *"I apologize for the inconvenience. This policy is designed to protect your privacy. I have researched your case and found that your notification letter was delayed because of a computer-related problem."*

- **Personalized.** Listen to what matters most to your customer and find the solution that best resolves his/her concern(s) while following organizational policies and procedures.

  Example: *"The computer problem has been fixed and I will make sure the letter is sent out today. If you prefer, I can also email a copy of the notification letter to your email address on file."*

- **Responsive.** Take action and be diligent in providing the assistance or information in a timely manner.

Example: *"As you requested, I will email the notification letter to your office. May I call you in 15 minutes to make sure you received it?"*

In addition, when thinking of how to respond to customers, think about how you would want to be treated if you were in a similar situation.

Section Summary

This section discussed some of the important communication techniques needed to provide effective customer service. By appropriately asking questions, listening, and responding, you can communicate effectively with customers, which will increase the likelihood that they will be satisfied with the service you provide.

TYPES OF
CUSTOMER SERVICE INTERACTIONS

In all of your interactions with customers, you should follow the fundamental communication techniques described in the previous section; however, there are some important differences to consider when providing customer service in person, over the telephone, or through email.

In Person

When working with customers in person, it is important to show your interest in them and what they have to say. Consider the following suggestions:

- Make eye contact and offer a friendly smile.
- Greet your customer by asking questions like, "Hello, how may I help you?" or "Good morning/afternoon, how are you?"
- Introduce yourself by giving your name, if appropriate.
- Ask for your customer's name. Listen attentively and empathize with a commitment to help.
- Always speak in a friendly and respectful manner.

- If an interpreter is required, maintain eye contact with and address your customer only. Do not speak to the translator during the conversation.
- Thank them for coming in if appropriate.

Even if you speak with several customers throughout the day, you should treat each one individually and offer the same courtesy you would expect if you were in the same situation.

In addition, present a professional image of yourself by following the dress code and related policies and procedures of the organization (e.g., wearing your identification badge at all times). An appropriate professional image helps to reinforce customers' confidence in the service you provide.

Body Language

There is more to communication than the words you speak. Body language is a non-verbal form of communication that involves the physical movements or gestures you make, some of which are subtle or unintentional. Your body language is an important aspect of communicating with customers in person. On occasion, customers may misinterpret your body language when you are not speaking or if your body language contradicts what you are saying.

For example, imagine walking into an office for a scheduled appointment and the following scenarios take place:

Scenario #1	Scenario #2
As you approach the front desk, the customer service professional is busy typing on a computer. After several seconds, he mumbles, "Yes?" without looking up at you.	As you approach the front desk, the customer service professional stops what he is doing, makes eye contact with you, offers a warm smile, and asks, "Hello, how may I help you?"

These examples illustrate the importance of appropriately matching your body language with your friendly and helpful attitude.

To ensure you are using positive body language, pay attention to your:

- **Facial Expression.** Have a relaxed, pleasant, and interested expression on your face to help put your customer at ease.

- **Body Posture and Movement.** Face your customer, nod, and lean forward slightly to show your interest in what he/she has to say.

- **Hand Gestures.** Do not use intimidating gestures such as pointing, folding your arms, or tapping your fingers.

- **Physical Distance.** Keep about three to four feet between you and your customer to provide a comfortable amount of personal space.

Telephone

Many of the techniques used to provide service in person can also be applied when you help customers over the telephone and vice versa. However, because customers who receive service over the telephone only hear the words you say and how you say them, your delivery plays an enhanced role in the interaction. Your voice is one of your best tools for making customers feel comfortable and trust that you will provide them with the best service. Some important aspects to how you communicate over the telephone include the volume, tone, and pace of your speech.

- **Volume**: This is how loudly or softly you speak. Balance your volume to avoid sounding aggressive (too loud) or difficult to understand (too soft). Check with your customer to make sure your volume is at an appropriate level.

- **Tone**: This is the manner you use to speak. It is the energy and enthusiasm that show through your voice. One technique for ensuring that your tone contributes to a positive telephone interaction is to smile as you speak with customers over the telephone. Though your customers cannot see you, this simple gesture can help you convey a helpful attitude that your customers will be able to perceive. Remember, *how* you say something is just as important as *what* you say.

- **Pace**: This is the speed of your speech. Speaking too quickly or too slowly can be distracting to customers and affect their ability to listen. Speaking at the right pace will help you express your thoughts clearly and prevent misunderstandings. Pay particular attention to your pacing if you are required to read telephone scripts or recite commonly used information. It is easy to convey this information too quickly for customers to understand.

As you speak over the telephone, listen carefully to your volume, tone, and pace to see how you can improve the service you provide.

Answering the Telephone

How you answer the telephone and what you say in the first few moments of the call will shape the first impression of the service that will be provided. To start each call with a positive first impression, follow the steps listed below:

Step 1: Answer the phone within three rings.

Step 2: Greet your customer by saying "Good morning/afternoon" or "Hello."

Step 3: Give your name and the name of your department or office.

Step 4: Let the customer know that you are ready to help.

For example, when you answer the phone you could say, "Good afternoon. You have reached Mendocino County; my name is Ivy. How may I help you?"

Assisting the Customer

Step 1: Listen carefully. Take notes if necessary. Pay Attention to the rate, volume and tone of speech as well as the nature of the caller's call/inquiry.

Step 2: Speak clearly. If you don't have the answer to the caller's question, place the customer on hold and ask or research.

Placing Customers on Hold

On occasion, you may need to place customers on hold so you can retrieve information, answer another line, or quickly handle another matter. When this occurs, use the following steps:

Step 1: Ask your customer if you may put him/her on hold. Be sure to wait for your customer to respond.

Step 2: Tell your customer approximately how long he/she will be on hold.

Step 3: Thank your customer for being patient and then put him/her on hold.

Step 4: Once you return, make sure to thank your customer for waiting.

Try to minimize the amount of time you leave customers on hold. The longer customers have to wait, the more dissatisfied they will become. If a situation arises where you need your customer to be on hold longer than originally intended, return to the line and ask your customer if he/she would like to continue to hold or if he/she would prefer to have <u>you</u> call him/her back at a later time.

Transferring Customers

If you are unable to provide the information or service that your customer requires, you may need to transfer the call to a co-worker who can help. To provide effective customer service when transferring customers, use the following steps:

Step 1: Explain to your customer why you are transferring him/her.

Step 2: Provide your customer with the co-worker's name and phone number.

Step 3: Obtain your customer's permission before transferring the call.

Step 4: Thank your customer for his/her patience.

Step 5: Transfer your customer to the appropriate destination.

In this situation, you should focus on providing effective customer service to both your customer and your co-worker. When possible, you should let your co-worker know that you will be transferring the call, particularly if it covers a complex or unique subject area. This will allow you to provide your co-worker with an overview of your customer's concern and any other information that may be useful. Additionally, this may reduce the amount of information your customer has to repeat.

Taking Messages

On occasion, a customer may ask you to take a message for one of your co-workers or your supervisor. If this occurs, be sure to ask if you can assist the customer yourself or ask if the customer would like to leave a voicemail message instead. If the customer still wants you to take a message, then record the:

- Customer's name and contact information.
- Best time to reach the customer.
- Customer's question or concern.

Verify that the information you recorded is correct by repeating it to the customer. If you are not in a private office setting (e.g., an office or empty conference room) and the message contains confidential information, do not repeat the information out loud to the customer. Instead, ask the customer to repeat the information to ensure you have the correct message. When finished, deliver the message and any relevant information to your co-worker or supervisor when he/she returns.
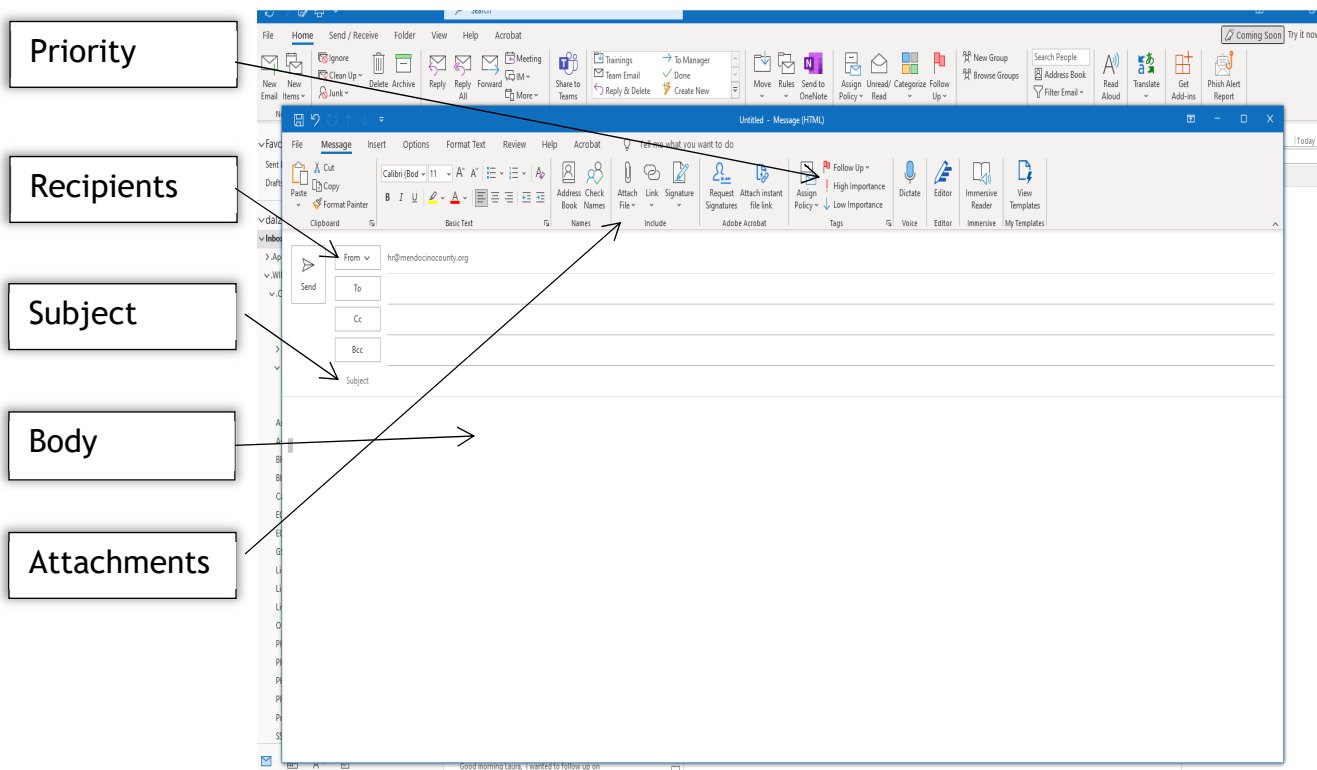
Email

Email is a form of communicating with your customer through writing, but when compared to composing and sending a letter, email is more immediate and dynamic. This makes it a particularly useful tool for quickly resolving customer concerns. Listed below are some additional advantages to using email to provide customer service:

- Email is a useful way to record contact attempts and the specific information provided to or discussed with your customers.
- Email messages can be used to confirm information and decisions discussed in person or over the telephone.

- You can use email messages to share files, notes, and other work-related materials.
- If your customer is difficult to reach by telephone (e.g., you have made several unsuccessful attempts to contact your customer or your voicemail messages have not been returned), email can provide a useful back-up to help ensure that your customer knows that you are trying to make contact.

Understanding the Parts of an Email

How you construct an email can affect the way customers receive, understand, and act upon the information it conveys. When you compose an email, you will need to consider the subject, the recipients, its priority, the main body, and any attachments you include.

Note: The above image is based on Microsoft Outlook 365. Other email programs may have a different appearance and/or set-up.

Subject

The subject is a one-line summary of the email that customers can view before opening the actual message. Effective subjects contain a clear, concise phrase that reflects the content of your message. In order for customers to open your message in a timely manner and retrieve it with ease, write a subject that will be meaningful and easy to understand. For example, "Customer Service Improvement Project" is a more meaningful subject than "Project." Additionally, avoid using acronyms or phrases that are unfamiliar to customers.

Recipients

There are three ways to indicate which customers will receive your message:

- **To**: Customers who are *directly* involved in, or affected by, the subject of your email message.
- **CC (carbon copy)**: Customers who may be *indirectly* involved, or affected by, the subject of your email message or those who you would like to receive a courtesy copy of your email message.
- **BCC (blind carbon copy)**: Similar to courtesy copy, but the names and email addresses of these customers are kept private from the "To" and "CC" recipients.

Be careful when selecting your list of recipients. Make an effort to ensure that recipients are limited to only those involved with the subject. This will reduce confusion and unnecessary or inappropriate communication. Additionally, list the names in alphabetical order, by order of relevance to the subject, or by title as a sign of courtesy and respect to each recipient.

Priority

When you have an important or urgent message, you can mark it as "high priority." This option flags your message so that customers know it should be opened before other email messages. Avoid overusing this option because it will lose its intended effect over time. Not all email programs have this feature.

Body

The body of your email contains the actual message you are sending. The information should be well organized and easy for customers to read. The following format guidelines will help ensure customers are able to read and understand your message:

- Use a font with a professional or neutral appearance (e.g., Times New Roman or Arial).
- Keep paragraphs short and separated by an extra blank line.
- Give directions or emphasize points with bullets or numbering.
- Avoid using acronyms or abbreviations whenever possible unless you know that your customers will understand them.
- DO NOT CAPITALIZE ENTIRE SENTENCES OR PARAGRAPHS BECAUSE IT CAN BE INTERPRETED AS SHOUTING AND IS OFTEN DIFFICULT TO READ.
- Create examples of messages you frequently send to save time and ensure consistency.

In addition to having a proper format, your messages should be clear, concise, and effective. They should convey all the necessary information in a manner that leaves a favorable impression on your customers. This can be a challenging task, and entire books have been written on this topic. In general, your emails to customers should include the following content:

- Greeting (e.g., Hello, Good Morning, Dear, etc.)
- Information about your understanding of the customer's concern
- Relevant information about the concern (e.g., case number)
- Recommendations of what can be done to resolve the concern
- Agreed upon actions that you have taken or will take to resolve the concern
- Your contact information
- Closing (e.g., Sincerely, Best Regards, Have a nice day, etc.)

Keep in mind that the information you put in an email can easily be shared and stored by your customer. It is best to read what you wrote at least twice to ensure that you stated accurate information and, in a style, and tone that is appropriate. Additionally, you should ensure that your emails follow any organizational policies and procedures about email writing style, format, or content.

According to Karen Leland, an expert in business communication and customer service, using the "GREAT" elements in your emails can help ensure that they appropriately convey your message and achieve effective customer service. You should always consider the:

- **Goal** – Why are you sending the email?

- **Relevance** – Did you include enough information without over-explaining?

- **Emotional Tone** – Is the message friendly and respectful?

- **Action** – Will your customer know *what* to do after reading your message?

- **Timeframe** – Will your customer know *when* to respond?

Once you have written the message, make sure to check it for punctuation, spelling, and grammatical errors and re-read the message one last time before sending it.

Attachments

When necessary, you can attach related files to your email message. For example, a customer may ask you to send him/her a form or document through email. Be sure to obtain your supervisor's approval if your customer requests a form or document that you do not usually send by email. Listed below are some additional suggestions for sending files though email:

- Be sure the file size is manageable, so it loads quickly and does not take up too much space in your customer's mailbox.
- Explain the reason why you are sending the attachment.
- Inform your customer of the type of file contained in the attachment. Some of the commonly used files include

   o Word processor documents (.doc).
   o Portable document files (.pdf).
   o Scanned photographs or images (.jpeg or .tiff).

- Follow-up with your customer after sending a file to verify that he/she received it and was as able to open it. Offer to answer any questions he/she may have.

Common Features

Most email programs come with time-saving features you can use when providing customer service through email. Refer to the User Manual or consult with information technology staff to determine the specific features your email system offers. Some common features include:

- **Address Books/Distribution Lists** – These allow you to send emails to a group of customers, which eliminates the need to separately key each email address. The emails can be set up to automatically assign customer groups as "To", "CC", or "BC" recipients.

- **Filters** – These automatically sort incoming email into predetermined folders so you can quickly locate, and access needed information related to specific topics.

- **Signature line** – This is a block of text that automatically appends at the bottom of your email message. You can use this feature to display your name, office contact information, and/or a privacy statement when sending confidential information.

Knowing When to Avoid Email

In some situations, email is not an effective or appropriate means of communicating with your customers. You should avoid using email when you need to communicate:

- **Complex Information** – email is most effective when it is used for routine business and for questions with quick, simple responses. Discuss complex information in person or over the telephone so you can answer questions and provide additional explanation, if necessary. In some situations, it may be appropriate to send an email after you have discussed complex information in person or over the telephone to clarify information, confirm actions to be taken, or provide additional explanation.

- **Confidential or Sensitive Information** – email is not completely secure, private, or confidential. Discuss sensitive or confidential information in person or over the telephone in a private office setting (e.g., an office or empty conference room). If must send or forward emails that contain confidential or sensitive information; double check that you have included the correct recipient(s) and be aware of the sensitivity of the subject matter – reconsider sending or forwarding.

Section Summary

This section presented specific suggestions for providing customer service in person, over the telephone, or through email. While many of the fundamental communication techniques remain the same, be aware that you will need to adapt your approach in order to provide effective service when you assist customers in these types of interactions.

RESOLVING CUSTOMER CONCERNS

Resolving customer concerns is an important aspect of customer service. This task can be challenging. However, if you are prepared to respond effectively, you can work to resolve the concerns and provide effective customer service.

In addition to the information discussed in the previous sections, there are several techniques to use when resolving customer concerns. This section will define customers' "implied expectations" and how to address them, describe a step-by-step process for resolving customer concerns, and provide suggestions on what to do if you cannot resolve the concerns.

Meeting Implied Expectations

Implied expectations refer to the treatment customers expect when receiving your assistance. Though customers rarely verbalize these expectations, most customers will have them to some degree regardless of their specific concern. The following table provides information on the types of implied expectations and suggestions for how to address them effectively in order to promote successful customer service interactions:

Customers' Implied Expectation	What It Means	How You Can Help

Information	Customers want to know how their concern will be resolved and why it will be resolved in that manner.	Provide relevant information (e.g., explain policy) and describe the steps you will take to resolve the concern.
Alternatives	Customers want to be given options about what to do if you cannot resolve their concern the way they initially request that it be resolved.	Offer additional options that may resolve the situation.
Fairness	Customers want to feel that they are being treated the same way as other customers with similar concerns. They also want the solution that you propose to seem fair and reasonable.	Treat customers consistently and explain what you have provided in similar situations. Provide explanations for your proposed solutions, as necessary.
Respect	Customers want to feel that you are taking their concerns seriously and that you value their impression of the interaction.	Be friendly and respectful, using language that is appropriate for your customers' levels of understanding (i.e., neither too complex nor overly-simplified).
Empathy	Customers want you to be sympathetic to their situations.	Acknowledge customers' concerns and try to see the situation from their perspectives.
Control	Customers want to have some say or influence over the outcome of the interaction.	Empower your customers by providing options and asking for permission before taking action. This may prevent customers from feeling helpless or discouraged.

The 5-Step Process for Resolving Customer Concerns

The following 5-step process for resolving customer concerns builds on the concepts discussed in the previous sections of this Guide (e.g., communicating effectively, responding appropriately to the different types of customer service interactions, and meeting customers' implied expectations). As you resolve customer concerns, be sure to incorporate the following steps into your approach.

STEP 1: Allow customers to express their frustration.

It is common for customers to want to express their feelings of frustration. Allowing them to talk about these feelings, or "vent" as it is sometimes called, shows them that you care and are interested in working with them to resolve their concerns. Actively listening to their concerns (e.g., maintaining eye contact, asking appropriate questions, paraphrasing, etc.) will likely reduce their level of frustration and help build their trust in your ability to resolve their concerns. Ignoring their feelings or telling them to "calm down" often makes the situation worse and escalates their level of frustration.

STEP 2: Empathize with customers and be supportive.

Empathy is a form of listening that focuses on recognizing or understanding your customers' points-of-view, or in other words, "putting yourself in their shoes." It is helpful to show your support by acknowledging the problem and expressing empathy. Empathy is strongly communicated through the tone of your voice. Be genuine and use language that is appropriate for your customers' levels of understanding (i.e., do not "talk over" or "talk down" to your customers). Listed below are some phrases that may help to show empathy:

- "I can understand why you feel that way."
- "I know that this can be very frustrating."
- "I can see where you're coming from."

Do **<u>not</u>** use the following phrases as they tend to reflect a lack of care or interest:

- "I'm only following the rules."
- "I just work here."
- "This isn't my fault."
- "This isn't my problem."

Additionally, if the problem is the result of an error made by the organization, apologize for the inconvenience and avoid making excuses, blaming others, or becoming defensive.

STEP 3: Resolve the concern.

Once you understand the concern, you can begin to work towards developing a solution. Your solution should focus on meeting your customers' needs, while staying within the policies and procedures of the organization. Listed below are some additional suggestions for resolving customer concerns:

- When possible, give customers choices and explain the pros and cons of each option. If appropriate, ask the customer to describe the solution he/she seeks. This approach empowers your customers and helps them believe that you are working with them rather than forcing them to accept your solution.

- After you agree on a solution, confirm it with your customers to ensure that they clearly understand it. When customers understand the actions you are taking and the processes related to the situation, they will be more likely to work with you and accept the results you can achieve.

- Do not lie, misrepresent information, or promise things you cannot deliver in order to reduce customers' frustration. While this strategy may satisfy customers at first, it will ultimately damage their trust in you and damage their opinion of the organization. It is critical to be realistic about what you can or cannot do.

If your customer raises a complaint about an action taken by your supervisor, you should still attempt to show empathy for your customer's situation. However, you should not express your own opinion on the issue. Instead, explain to your customer that you will pass the information on to an appropriate staff member to help resolve the situation. This will allow your customer to receive assistance without putting you in a position to criticize the actions of your supervisor.

STEP 4: Thank your customer for sharing his/her concern(s).

Thanking your customer for bringing problems to your attention demonstrates the value you place on the customer experience. Be sure to notify your supervisor if you notice any themes or common issues in customer concerns. The information

collected from customer concerns can help to improve current and future organizational policies and procedures.

STEP 5: Follow up with the appropriate individuals.

After a solution has been agreed upon, work to ensure that it is put into action. This will require you to follow-up both with your customer and with any other individuals who may have been involved in implementing the solution. Be sure to also ask your customer if the solution was effective in resolving his/her concern.

When You Cannot Resolve Your Customer's Concern

Even when you cannot resolve your customer's concern, you can still provide effective customer service by meeting the implied expectations discussed at the beginning of this section. When this occurs, be considerate when explaining the situation to your customer and offer alternative solutions that can still be helpful. For example:

- Explain that you are unsure of the answer to his/her question but will find out and follow up with him/her within a reasonable timeframe. Depending on the complexity of the concern, tell the customer when he/she can expect to receive a response from you.

- Inform your customer that you are unable to perform the service and offer to refer him/her to a co-worker who can provide the desired service or a similar service that may resolve the concern(s). Depending on the complexity of the concern, tell the customer when he/she can expect to receive a follow-up response from you.

- Explain that a specific request is against policy, collect any additional information to help understand your customer's exact concern(s), and explain other possible solutions that are within policy.

Section Summary

This section presented information regarding implied expectations and a step-by-step process for resolving customer concerns. Each step is an important part of providing effective customer service that must not be skipped. At times during the

process, you may need to revisit previous steps to ensure that you are effectively resolving the concern(s).

Additionally, remembering customers' implied expectations and following the 5-step process helps you to remain calm, patient, and professional when interacting with customers who are upset, critical, or rude. These customers are most likely frustrated with an organizational policy, human error, or miscommunication rather than being personally angry with you. By resolving their concerns in a professional manner, you can promote a positive outcome for them.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

You will likely interact with individuals with diverse backgrounds as you provide customer service. This provides an opportunity to learn and expand your understanding but may also require you to make adjustments to ensure that you are providing effective customer service to *all* of the people you assist. Although there are many similarities in how all customers want and expect to be treated, it is important to be sensitive to cultural differences when providing customer service.

You should never assume customers will adhere to typical characteristics associated with their culture; however, it is important to recognize these differences (where appropriate) so you are able to adapt your customer service techniques to provide the highest level of service to each customer.

Cultural Differences to Consider

Listed below is an overview of some possible cultural differences you may encounter and general suggestions for accommodating them:

- **Personal Space.** Your customer may have different preferences on the amount of personal space to use when communicating in person. Be sensitive to these potential differences and look for non-verbal cues (e.g., the customer takes a step away from you) that may indicate that your customer is uncomfortable.

- **Eye Contact.** Your customer may avoid eye contact during a conversation. Do not assume that this means he/she is shy or trying to avoid the conversation. Similar to personal space, pay attention to non-verbal cues and make appropriate adjustments (e.g., avoiding direct eye contact) if you perceive that a customer is uncomfortable.

- **Communication.** Your customer may not be familiar with certain terms and/or gestures. Use plain language and common terms when speaking, avoid using gestures to communicate, and clarify with your customer, if necessary.

- **Time.** Your customer may place a higher priority on promptness than other customers. For example, someone may view agendas or schedules as goals that do not necessarily have to be achieved while another may view them as commitments that should always to be kept. Be flexible and considerate when addressing time arrangements with your customers.

- **Formality.** Your customer may place a greater emphasis on formality as a sign of respect than other customers. Refer to your customer using a title (e.g., Mr., Ms., Dr., Sgt., etc.) and his/her last name unless you receive permission to use his/her first name.

A general rule for helping to promote positive customer service interactions when you perceive cultural differences is to avoid judging and communicate with your customers to ensure that you share the same understanding.

Section Summary

This section presented an overview of cultural differences as they relate to providing customer service. Awareness of cultural differences and points of consideration were discussed. Remember to be sensitive and respectful of potential differences by treating each customer as an individual and to be flexible and adapt your customer service techniques when appropriate.

CONCLUSION

Developing your understanding of customer service is essential for your success in today's organizations. This Guide provided a general definition of customer service and an introduction to some of the techniques, strategies, and suggestions used to 1) communicate effectively with customers; 2) interact in person, by telephone, and through email with customers; 3) resolve customer concerns; and 4) understand cultural differences.

Additional Resources

Reading this Guide is a first step to helping you develop effective customer service skills. To help you gain a deeper understanding of customer service, you may consider seeking additional information about the topics presented in this Guide. Other resources (e.g., books, workshops, seminars, Internet resources, etc.) are available to expand your understanding of effective customer service.

Your Feedback

In order to assist us in enhancing this document, we would greatly appreciate any feedback you would like to provide. Please visit the Customer Service website @ https://www.mendocinocounty.org/government/human-resources/leadership-initiative/leadership-initiative-project-teams/customer-service. Thank you in advance for your response.

LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

Mendocino County Executive Leadership Team (MCELT)

Established in January 2017, MCELT's function is to develop, implement and maintain policies and programs that align with the County's Leadership Philosophy. Seven project Teams were created by MCELT in the areas of communication, operational processes, employee engagement, economic development, customer service, performance plans and recruitment and retention.

These project teams are made up of employees at various levels of employment within the County and work under the guidance of MCELT members.

Goal Getters   Special Ops   Employee Engagement   Customer Service   Communication   Recruitment & Retention   Economic Development
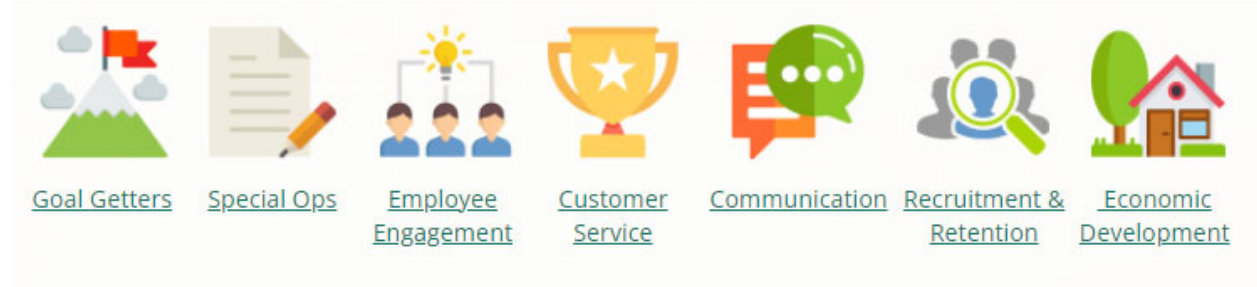
About the Mendocino County Leadership Initiative

At its core, the purpose of the Leadership Development Initiative is to transform our organizational culture by cultivating "leaders at all levels" within the organization by engaging, developing, supporting, and utilizing our employees to their fullest potential.

Leadership Philosophy   **Videos & Resources**   **Leadership Book Club**   **Leadership Project Teams**

To learn more about our leadership initiative, contact:

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