



Help
Desk
Institute

*Training, educational materials and a
networking forum for Help Desk professionals.*

Customer Service Skills

*For Technical
Support Professionals*

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So what's your problem?

A sharp buzz from the telephone announced another incoming call. Jack sighed deeply. On the second buzz, he started counting rings... "three... four..."

Jack sipped his soft drink, pitched his spreadsheet manual back onto the deck, slipped a stick of gum between his lips, and adjusted his headset. "...fiiive... sssiix... seeevvveennnnnn... okay..." Punching the blinking button harder than necessary, Jack turned on The Voice of Authority.

"Help Desk. I'm Jack. What's your problem?"

"Uh, this is Alice in sales support," said the startled voice.

"Uh, I'm, uh... locked out."

"Locked out, huh?" Jack said. "What's that?"

"I can't, uh, get to my program."

"Where are you?"

"E1706..."

"No! No! Not your room number! I mean, where in the program?" Jack was getting exasperated, and showed it.

"What's on your screen?"

"Password."

"Password?"

"Uh, yeah... just the word 'password'. That's what's on my screen. I forgot my password. I don't use the computer much, and..."

"Look, Alice," Jack broke in. "That's your name, right? Alice? Gimme your node ID. I'll get your password. But do me a favor. Don't write it down, but make sure you *remember* it this time, OK?"

Alice got her password. Then she had a talk with her manager, who had a talk with Jack's. The Help Desk manager, Mary, was new on the job, and determined to improve the quality of Help Desk staff and services.

So guess what Help Desk analyst got the assignment of researching and reporting on customer service skills?

A little help from a friend

As part of his special assignment, Jack visited Alice and tried to patch things up. During lunch together, she told Jack a little bit about how all successful sales and support people look at their customers.

“Back in my office – that’s E1706, if you recall –” Alice said with a grin, “I have this poster I’ll give you – since you’re buying lunch.”

After lunch, Jack and Alice walked back to her office. The poster on the wall behind Alice’s desk asked “What is a Customer?” in bold letters. “This defines ‘customer’ for people who want to *keep* their customers,” Alice said.

Sitting down in her chair, Alice folded her hands in her lap and smiled at Jack. “I keep the poster there so my customers can see it when they’re sitting where you are,” she said. “The poster reminds them how really important they are to me. There’s another just like it behind you. That’s to remind me.

“Why don’t you take the one behind you. I can get another. I really think it will help you with your assignment.”

She got up, walked around the desk, and shook Jack’s hand. “I appreciate your coming to talk with me. That really helps me,” she said. “And thanks for lunch!”

Back in his office, Jack felt a little sheepish. He carefully unrolled his poster on the desk (a copy of his poster appears on the opposite page). “That makes sense,” he said to himself. “Alice is pretty bright.”

Jack showed the poster to his manager, Mary. “That looks like a pretty good start,” she said. “Why don’t we have a short staff meeting tomorrow? You can share these ideas with everyone else.”

Jack announced the breakfast meeting, for which Mary would provide donuts and juice. Some of his fellow Help Desk staffers just rolled their eyes and sighed at the news. Jack was a little embarrassed by the whole episode, so far. But, he thought, Mary and Alice do have a point. The Help Desk could really use a change of attitude.

What is a Customer?

A customer is the most important person in any business.

A customer is not dependent on us. We are dependent on him.

A customer is not an interruption of our work. He is the purpose of it.

A customer does us a favor when he asks for help. We aren't doing him a favor by helping him.

A customer *is* our business – not an outsider.

A customer is a human being with feelings, and deserves to be treated with respect.

A customer comes to us with his needs and wants. It is *our* job to fill them.

A customer deserves the most courteous attention we can give him.

A customer is the lifeblood of this and every business. He pays our salary. Without him we would have to close our doors.

— *Author Unknown*

Why are we here?

Next morning, Jack was at work early to set up the meeting and greeted everyone as they came in. When all were seated, he explained the purpose of the meeting.

"Mary asked me to look into ways we could improve our customer service skills," he said. A few snickers from the back. Jack turned a little red, smiled, looked down at his shoes, and continued.

"We – Mary and I – that is, thought it would be a good idea to get your ideas as to why we are here. Just what is our job?"

A few comedians in the group quickly volunteered their ideas. But when Jack seriously persisted, these answers emerged.

"Well, we help people with their problems. Sometimes we have to search and research to find the answer. Sometimes an answer is easy."

"We try to find patterns in the problems, so we can eliminate them."

"Our real job is helping other people do *their* jobs."

"We help almost everyone improve productivity."

"We help our customers, our technical staffs, and our vendors."

Jack wrote this summary on the white board:

- Research and solve problems.
- Identify and eliminate recurring problems.
- Improve productivity of customers, employees and vendors.

"Okay, we all pretty much agree that these are our primary purposes for being here," Jack said. "Now I want to give you something additional I learned recently, and get your responses."

Jack unrolled the poster and hung it next to the white board.

“Someone – I think it was Scott,” he continued, “said something about how we help our customers. Well, I want to suggest that all of the calls we receive are from our customers.” Jack went on to explain where he got the poster, then he read it aloud. When he was finished, he said, “So what do you think? I’m new at this, too. Someone help me.”

After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, someone said, “That customer stuff is pretty hard to argue with. And you do make a good point. We do owe our callers – no, our *customers* – a lot. I think it’s pretty obvious that we’ve mistreated many of them. At the least, we’ve mistreated them in our attitudes.”

Heads nodded in agreement. Voices buzzed. Then someone spoke up. “Okay, so how *do* you change attitudes?”

“By changing your actions,” another replied. “Even when you don’t feel like it.”

“I’ve got a story for you,” began a third person. “Maybe we can do something about this. I was in the cafeteria the other day, and two women were talking about us. They were being pretty vocal about it, too. They were telling the other people at their table to not bother calling the Help Desk, because we were really no help at all.”

“Do you know the ones who were talking?” Jack asked.

“One of them was Jane in Accounting. I didn’t know the other one.”

“Jack,” said Mary, “why don’t you follow up with Jane to see about the problem. This could be important as part of your project. It might help all of us.” Jack agreed.

As the meeting closed, Jack promised to research the skills needed to improve customer service, and then report back to the others.

How do you satisfy a customer?

After the meeting, Jack pulled a history of Jane's calls. According to the records, all of her problems were resolved. But she was still irate. To get to the bottom of this, Jack went to talk to her in person.

"Yes," said Jane, after Jack introduced himself, "they always did solve my problems. But I got tired of being treated like a dummy."

Jack cringed a little as Jane continued. "The guy on the line always made me feel stupid. I'm an accountant, not a computer whiz. The computer is a tool for me, and that's all. I don't need to know much about how it works and, frankly, I'm really not interested."

"I don't need that kind of grief. I can get help anywhere. I'll just never, ever use that so-called Help Desk again. I've told my supervisor, and he agrees. None of us are going to bother using the Help Desk. Period."

Despite his discomfort, Jack thanked Jane for her candor. He then apologized and explained the changes currently taking place at the Help Desk. "I'll just ask one favor, Jane. Try the Help Desk the next time you have a problem. If nothing's changed, then I agree with you – don't use us. But I think you'll be pleasantly surprised."

Jane agreed... reluctantly.

The next day, Jack attended a customer service seminar. The facts he learned tied in with his recent experience.

First, he was amazed to learn that 96 percent of dissatisfied customers stop using a service. That was certainly the case with Jane. But he was able to convince her to give them another chance. Jane, he learned, was one of the 54 percent of the dissatisfied who will try again if the problem is resolved. He also learned that, if they had known about Jane sooner, they might have been able to prevent the damage caused by her dissatisfaction. This is because 95 percent of dissatisfied customers will continue using a service if the problem is resolved the same day.

Then there was the one percent of dissatisfied customers who will never use a service again, no matter what you do. This worried Jack. That one percent will complain to others, as Jane had done. And those hearing the complaint may never give the Help Desk even one chance.

In his notebook, Jack wrote:

The best goal is to strive for

customer satisfaction 100% of the time,

rather than take the chance of losing

just one customer forever.

The seminar taught Jack many things, including the idea that every person who helps a customer provides a service to that customer. But many customers who receive service are dissatisfied. There is a big difference between customer service and customer satisfaction. Customer service, Jack learned, is provided by the technical support person. Customer satisfaction is always, and only, determined by the customer's *perception* of that service.

A few more observations from Jack's notebook:

- Anyone can provide customer service, but don't stop there. Take those extra steps to ensure satisfaction. You can avoid problems by always going the extra mile.
- Customer service skills can't be developed overnight. It takes practice to replace old behaviors with new ones.
- Winston Churchill said it best:
"Never, never, never give up!"
- Remember: Each customer has the power to create a positive or negative image of our department, based on what we do.

Basic emotions

At the seminar, Jack also learned about emotions – something he didn't understand very well. The seminar speaker said that, according to psychologists, human beings experience only four basic emotions:

- Happiness
- Anger
- Fear
- Depression

The degree of the emotion depends upon the situation. For example, a passing grade on a child's report card may cause happiness, while an A+ may create jubilation.

The instructor emphasized, "To ensure customer satisfaction, you must **turn every service contact into a win-win situation** – one in which all parties feel happy. It's relatively easy to accomplish this, because emotions are contagious. If you become angry with customers, that emotion will rub off on them and cause them to become defensive and angry too. Likewise, if you are sincerely interested in the customer, and offer genuine help, the resulting positive emotions will rub off." Jack realized that this is what is missing from his Help Desk. When he was abrupt and cocky with Alice, she got upset. In his notebook, he added:

*I hold the key to the emotions my customers
feel toward me. Remember Alice!!*

The seminar leader said, "You should **manage the state of your own emotions**. Sometimes you just get up on the wrong side of the bed, or the stress of the commute in to work gets to be too much, and you are not your normally happy self. What should you do?"

"The best way to change your bad mood into a positive mood is to *think* of yourself as happy. What do happy people do? **Smile!** Believe it or not, it is very difficult to feel anger, depression or fear if you are smiling. Try it!"

"But your smile must be genuine. Look in a mirror. Does your smile look pasted on, or does it start with your eyes and encompass your entire being?"

Jack added to his notebook,

Focus your energy on turning every situation

into a win-win. You will feel much happier

at the end of the day.

Promote a service attitude

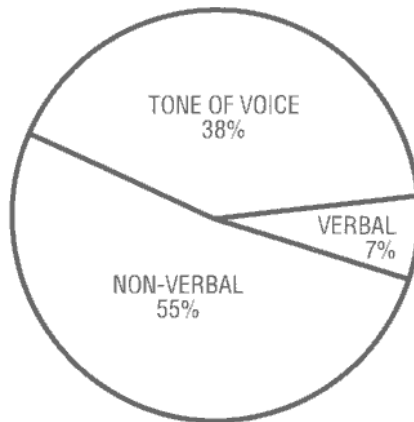
Jack knew the service attitude must encompass an entire organization for it to work properly. The seminar leader confirmed this. "While you hold the key to a great many areas that affect customer satisfaction, you cannot do it all alone. To ensure every customer is satisfied, **the entire technical support area must develop a service attitude.**"

Jack noted these attitude-improving methods:

- **Be a proud professional.** The service that you provide to the customer is very important.
- **Recognize success** in yourself and others. Pats on the back make everyone feel better.
- **Know the goals** of your organization and your department. Knowing goals is a means for measuring accomplishment.
- **Conduct customer surveys.** How can you ensure customer satisfaction if you don't know customers' expectations and perceptions of the service they receive?
- **Commit to exceeding customer expectations.** By exceeding customer expectations, you will almost certainly ensure customer satisfaction.

Oral/visual communication skills

The seminar emphasized the need to communicate clearly. Jack noted its importance to providing customer service that guarantees customer satisfaction. "You must **develop excellent communication skills**," the leader said. "Communication is the process of sending and receiving messages so they are *understood*." Jack was surprised to see the relative importance of different parts of message communication. In his notebook, he drew this diagram:



The seminar leader explained the graph. "Verbal communication," he said, "has to do with the actual words spoken. Verbal communication makes up only 7% of the entire process of sending messages."

"Non-verbal communication includes gestures, body language, facial expressions and silence," the leader continued. "Remember the saying 'Actions speak louder than words'. Non-verbal communication can change the entire meaning of verbal communication. Because of this, it is easy to see why non-verbal communication is 55% of message sending."

"The remaining 38% of the process is made up of your tone of voice," said the instructor. Jack's conscience gave him a small twinge. "Tone of voice, of course, is the way you speak the message."

“Since most Help Desk customers telephone for help, your tone of voice becomes very important. It only takes five seconds to establish a mood over the telephone!”

Jack, still feeling some embarrassment for his past problems in this area, wrote these pointers in his notebook.

- **Smile!** Smiling relaxes the vocal cords. When you speak, the customer really can hear your smile.
- **Give undivided attention.** If you are distracted, the customer can hear it in your voice.
- **Sit up straight.** Poor posture can cause a change in the tone of your voice.
- **Put past calls out of your mind.** If a previous caller irritated you, don't let that encounter affect the way you handle other customers.

My tone of voice sets the stage for

the conversation. The telephone can help

me do my job or hinder me. It is up to me!

Basic needs of every customer

“Always think of your customer’s needs,” the leader said. “When customers call the Help Desk, they have two basic needs. They are:

1. The need for assistance.
2. The psychological need to be treated with dignity and respect.

“The need for assistance can be fulfilled by determining the problem and implementing a solution.” Jack thought back to Jane’s need for assistance. All of her problems were resolved in a timely manner. However, Jane’s psychological need was not met. Rather than being treated with dignity and respect, she was treated as if she were stupid. As a result, Jane was a dissatisfied customer.

Jack noted several phrases that show respect:

- “Your problem is important”
- “I understand”
- “Thank you for calling”
- “You are important”

Don't let customers walk away because they don't feel respected. Even if you can't solve their problems, you can always show them respect — and you should!
