

Retail Adventures in the Real World™

TAKING CUSTOMER SERVICE

to the *Next Level*

By Rich Kizer and Georganne Bender

To keep your customers coming back for more, your service must be . . .

The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language defines the word Oxymoron as “A rhetorical figure in which incongruous or contradictory terms are combined, as in a deafening silence and a mournful optimist.” Or customer service.

We can all agree that customer service is an important part of every business. And we can probably also agree that customer service is subjective. Service that thrills one customer may be just okay to another. And there is danger in providing “satisfactory” service.

Vanderbilt University recently conducted a study on customer satisfaction. The study found that approximately 25–40 percent of satisfied customers do not return to a place of business even if they are satisfied. What’s the reason customers do not return? Because they were merely satisfied.

The Unofficial Kizer & Bender Dictionary of Customer Service defines Satisfactory as “Doing just enough to get by.”

Do you have a parking lot? Do you have shopping carts, a cash register and bags? Great. That’s what it means to satisfy





"Associates are trained professionals who are empowered to make customers happy. Period." 

a customer's basic needs – just getting by – but it's not enough to keep customers coming back for more. You only have to look around you to see all of the choices customers have today. Why shop in a store that's just okay when you can shop somewhere else and be thrilled? So, if the things that you sell are great, but your customer service isn't, here are some things to consider:

... STRICTLY DEFINED

If you have shopped in a Nordstrom Department Store then you have experienced great customer service. The sales associates at Nordstrom sure know their stuff, they make customers feel like a million bucks. How do they do that?

Do you think that each time Nordstrom enters a new market they bring an entire store team with them from some other town? Nope. They find all of their hundreds of new employees right there in the community. Your community. In a past life, the attentive sales person carefully wrapping your purchase may have

once asked you if you'd "like fries with that."

The thing that makes Nordstrom shine is their unwavering definition and approach to great customer service. Associates are trained professionals who are empowered to make customers happy. Period.

Do your sales associates know your personal definition of great customer service? Put aside an hour or two and outline your definition of great service. Part of your definition might include: Uniquely greeting every customer within 90 seconds; acknowledging each customer you encounter in the store; answering the telephone within five rings, etc.

Now, here's the time consuming part: each of the areas you identify will require you to write a customer service standard of operation.

Written service standards do two things: They are a powerful way to shape the perceptions that customers have of your store; and they are a great management tool to help you measure how well your associates are meeting your required level of service.

Each of your customer service standards must specifically tell associates

Standards for Standards

You can't measure friendly, and you can't measure smiles, but you can turn customer service qualities into specific and measurable actions that you expect your associates to follow. A standard that reads, "Pay attention to customers" can mean different things to different people. "Acknowledge all customers who pass within seven floor tiles of you" is to the point, easily understood by all.

Each of your customer service standards must follow these three universal guidelines.

- They must be **Specific**, outlining exactly what is expected of your associates
- They must be **Concise** and to the point, spelling out who should do what, when, and how
- They must be **Measurable** and easy to observe with an objective eye

The best customer service standards are the ones you write with your team. When your associates are involved in the creation of your standards, you'll have a mutual understanding of what's important to the success of the store, plus your associates will be more likely to follow them precisely as written.

You need a customer service standard for every customer contact in your store.

- Greeting the Customer
- Answering the Telephone
- Handling Returns
- Placing a Special Order
- Purchasing a Gift Certificate
- Registering for a Class
- Dealing with Suspected Shoplifting
- Handling Misbehaving Children

Think of your standards as the chapters in a book you write about your store.

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“The last customer out the door in the evening deserves the same care as the first one in the door in the morning.”

what is expected of them. Your standards must be concise and easy to understand, they need to define what is to be done, how it should be done,

a game plan to follow, and an objective way for you to monitor how well they are doing.

When your customer standards are complete, immediately schedule a store meeting to discuss how you expect customer service to be handled in your store. Make sure that you cover your new service policy with every person who works, or is affiliated with, your store. This includes contracted workers like class instructors and demonstrators; anyone who officially represents your store.

Kizer & Bender's *Top Service Tips:*

-  Answer questions
-  Solve problems
-  Fix what's broken
-  Find what's lost
-  Make people happy

by whom, and when. And most importantly, your standards must be based on your customers wants, needs, and expects. The best part is that once they are written down on paper, your standards give associates

ple working in your store right now who are wonderfully creative. Great, let them be creative in the back room, away from customers. The associates on the sales floor need to do the following:

... AN ATTITUDE

No doubt, working with customers day in and out, isn't easy. Consistently delivering great service requires the right attitude. The last customer out the door in the evening deserves the same care as the first one in the door in the morning. The customer who spends \$1.00 deserves the same respect as the customer who spends \$100.00.

Hire nice people, because nice is hard to teach. You may have talented, but surly peo-

Standards for Standards

Writing a customer service standard is merely outlining the step-by-step process that reflects an average customer encounter. That step-by-step process might look like this for your Customer Check-Out Standard

- Customer approaches checkout counter
- Cashier warmly greets the customer
- Cashier makes direct eye contact with the customer, smiles brightly and says, "Good morning/afternoon/evening"
- Cashier uses the customer's name if he/she knows it
- Cashier asks the customer if he/she found everything he/she was looking for
- Cashier politely and attentively reacts accordingly to customer's answer and responds as necessary
- Cashier scans items and places them carefully in a bag
- Cashier recommends add-on items
- Cashier asks customer how he/she wishes to pay
- Cashier handles transaction, and hands the customer his/her change.
- Cashier thanks customer and asks if he/she can help with anything else
- Cashier invites customer to return and visit the store again

In this example, you would want to make sure that your associates know that this is how they are to respond in each check out encounter. Explain that you understand that there will be times when the process will not go exactly as outlined in the standard, but you expect them to include each step in every checkout transaction. □

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“The policies you have posted throughout your store are silent purveyors of your personal view of customer service.”

1. Follow the Golden Rule: “Treat others the way you want to be treated.” Acknowledge every customer with respect and dignity.

2. Be empathetic. Take a walk in your customers shoes and try to see yourself and your store through their eyes; it will make a big difference in how you react to a customer’s question or complaint.

3. Be responsive. Show a willingness to help customers promptly and to their complete satisfaction.

4. Keep your promises. If you promise to call a customer at a certain time, make sure that you follow through. How well you keep your word is a direct reflection of who you are.

5. Never tell a customer “We can’t do that” unless you follow with “Here’s what we can do ...”

... PUT THE CUSTOMERS FIRST

The policies you have posted throughout your store are silent purveyors of your personal view of customer service. We’ve found unbelievably nasty policies in stores where we thought the customer was

numero uno. Be your own customer for a moment and take a hard look at your policies. How do they communicate your message? The written word can be tricky – you may think you are saying one thing, but the customer sees something else. Do your policies “speak” in the proper voice? Are they written in a polite and respectful way? Do they make customers’ feel like you are on their side?

A return policy that reads: “No returns, no exchanges, no exceptions” isn’t going to attract many customers in this day and age. It just makes you look unprofessional. A policy that states, “We will gladly refund or exchange your purchase within 30 days. Your receipt guarantees it.” is a much better choice.

NEXT LEVEL CUSTOMER SERVICE POLICES ALWAYS PUT THE CUSTOMER FIRST

When it comes to customer service, you can never rest. You must constantly be on the look out to take your current service standards to the next level. Each time you review a policy or procedure, be sure to look at them through your customers’ eyes. Same thing with your sales associates – evaluate their service performance from a customer perspective as well. Even when you think things are running smoothly, there is always the opportunity to do better.

Great customer service is answering questions, solving problems, fix-

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Service Success: A Wilted Wedding

A craft store owner told us this story of how his store staff did the impossible, getting the father-of-the- bride out of hot water.

It was a hot Friday in July, the day before his only daughter was to be married, and the nervous father-of-the- bride was charged with picking up the flowers. His explicit directions were to stop at the florist and place the flowers in the refrigerator.

But dad was distracted and running late. He rushed home, changed clothes, and hightailed it to the rehearsal dinner.

Saturday he awoke in a panic, realizing that he had never transferred the wedding flowers to the refrigerator. Every single flower was horribly wilted.

At 7 a.m. he was on the phone with the florist who told him that it would be impossible to replace his flowers on such short notice. Around 9 a.m., the bride-to-be took a chance and called the craft store. The store manager listened to the bride’s dilemma, then asked what color flowers and type of arrangements she was looking for, and how many she needed. The manager then called all of the associates together and told them the story of the ruined wedding flowers. The associates accepted the challenge and went to work.

At 3 p.m., the manager and several associates unloaded the beautiful silk arrangements at the church, then refused the father’s offer to double the invoice price. “That’s just the way we do things around here,” the manager said.

In the end, the entire store staff and spouses were invited to attend the wedding and reception. And the store that was happy to help because “That’s just how we do things around here,” became an overnight legend in the community. □

Retail Adventures in the Real World

ing what's broken and finding what's lost. It's making people happy and calming those who are not. It's the retail equivalent of pulling a rabbit out of a hat every single day – with a smile on your face!

Just about every competitor sells the same product, just not in the same way. Customer service is the last great proving ground to

differentiate your store from all of the rest. Let your competitors deliver satisfactory service, you're on to Next Level Customer Service. Is customer service an oxymoron? Not in your store! ♦



Service Success: Burger Bounce-back

We were having lunch at a chain restaurant that specializes in cheeseburgers – our favorite food. The server was a pleasant woman who did everything right, but when 45 minutes passed, and we still did not have our food, we began to worry. Surrounding tables had been served their burgers, even though they had arrived after us.

We asked our server to check on our food. A few minutes later, she sheepishly returned and told us she had forgotten to place our order. She admitted that she made a mistake and apologized. The manager also apologized and hoped that we would understand that the restaurant often hires people with no prior experience. We understood completely – but we were still hungry.

When a customer service hiccup like this one occurs, you have to do two things: 1. Fix the problem; 2. Fix the customer. In our case, the manager fixed the problem by quickly getting us our lunch and then picking up the check.

He fixed the customer by giving each of us a gift certificate for another free lunch. He said, "This is a great restaurant, and we serve a great burger. We're much better than you've experienced today. Please let us prove it to you."

We've returned to this restaurant, and the same server, many times. Each time the manager was true to his word – they are a great restaurant with a great cheeseburger! □