

Ten Customer Service Questions

By Ramona Creel

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It's a common misconception by business owners -- we THINK that we provide good customer service, but how do you really know? Sometimes, it seems like the only way to find out that you aren't offering good service is to hear about it through a customer COMPLAINT. Unfortunately, most customers won't take the time to complain -- they will simply go somewhere else. So it's up to you to be PROACTIVE and examine your customer service policies before there is a problem. The easiest way to do this is to pretend that you are the customer. Pretend that you are coming to your company for services -- and ask yourself the following questions about your company.

ARE YOU CONVENIENT TO DO BUSINESS WITH?

Does your company make itself easily available to clients? If most of your clients work during the day, do you offer evening and weekend hours? Do your clients have to come to you, or will you go to them? And if they do come to you, are you easy to find? Do you offer several different payment methods -- like accepting cash, checks, and credit cards? And finally -- the most important question -- what can you do to make your business MORE CONVENIENT to the customer? Remember, your customers are granting you a tremendous favor by giving you their business -- the last thing that you want to do to repay that favor is to make it difficult for them to work with you.

ARE YOUR COMPANY POLICIES CLEAR?

There is nothing more frustrating --for the customer or the business -- than getting partway through a transaction and then finding that there is CONFUSION about your company's policies. It might be that your client doesn't understand your payment terms -- or didn't realize that he would be charged for the appointment if he cancelled without 24-hours notice -- or didn't understand that he needed to include a copy of the packing slip when returning a product. It's critically important that you outline all of your business policies and procedures as clearly as possible UP FRONT -- before you ever begin work with the client. Lay everything out in a contract or agreement letter, discuss any potentially confusing language, ask your customer to sign it, and give him or her a copy. This is the easiest way to avoid problems down the road.

ARE YOU WILLING TO BE FLEXIBLE?

While it is important that you have some standard policies in place, it's also a good customer service move to be "bendy" with your clients. I call this having a FLEXIBLE FRAMEWORK. You lay down the law, letting your clients know how you function as a business person and how you expect them to interact with you. But, on a CASE-BY-CASE basis, you are willing to work with a client -- to

bend the rules a little -- if it means keeping that client happy. For example, your policy might state that you are to be paid at the time of service. But when a long-time client is running short on cash and asks if she can send you a check next week, you tell her yes as a gesture of goodwill. That client is much more likely to continue patronizing your business -- and even send you a few referrals -- than if you were hard-nosed about it and told her no.

ARE YOUR SALESPEOPLE KNOWLEDGEABLE?

Okay, so if you are a one-person business, you are the only salesperson. Are you able to provide your customers with INFORMATION -- statistics, related resources, service benefits, product comparisons, and referrals to other professionals who provide complementary services? More importantly, if you don't have this information, are you willing and able to find it -- do a little RESEARCH and get back to the customer? Are you a full-service resource for your clients, or merely a manual laborer?

ARE YOU EASY TO CONTACT?

If your clients need to reach you, how can they do it? Do you offer a toll-free number, or 24-hour call center? At the very least, do you have a dedicated business line with a VOICE MAIL or answering service? Do you carry a cell phone or PAGER? Do you have an e-mail address and contact information on your website? And when someone does leave a message or send you an e-mail, how long does it take for you to RESPOND?

ARE YOU EASY TO COMPLAIN TO?

In today's society, it takes an awful lot for a customer to complain about bad service. It's much easier to tell all of your friends and family and colleagues how horrible Company X was -- rather than to call up Company X and tell them directly. So as a business owner, you need to make it incredibly easy for people to give you FEEDBACK -- positive or negative. You will have the greatest success if you set up a three-tiered approach. First, CALL the client (or send an e-mail if you are doing web business) within one-week of the your transaction just to follow up and see if you can assist the client in any way. Then, within one month of service, send a lengthier written (or web-based) SURVEY -- asking for comments and suggestions. Finally, if the client had any problems or concerns, follow-up with a personal phone call to discuss them in more depth. If you don't have time to do this yourself, you can always contract out to a VA or telemarketing firm -- but it's vital that you INITIATE the conversation.

DO YOU ACTUALLY IMPLEMENT CLIENT SUGGESTIONS?

It doesn't do any good to ask for a client's feedback if it's just going to get pitched into a file or left in your e-mail in-box. You actually have to move that idea into some form of ACTION -- clarify (or even change) your policies, implement a new follow-up program, offer specially-priced sale packages, make an addition to your marketing materials -- whatever it takes to keep your customer happy. And when you do follow-through with a bit of client feedback, be sure to send that customer a letter. Tell them how much you appreciated their opinions, and point out how you have put their suggestions into action. You will always come across as a hero.

ARE YOU QUICK TO ACT?

In business, it is really true that you are either quick or you are dead. With the advent of e-mail, faxes, paging, and cell phones, people expect IMMEDIATE responses to their questions and concerns (rightly or wrongly!) And if you don't get right back to your clients, one of your competitors will. So look at your response time -- do you call your clients back within 24 hours? Do you leave

information on your voice mail letting people know when you will get back with them? It's always nice when you can prevent your clients from hanging out in voice mail LIMBO -- saying, "I'm out of the office until 3:00 and will return calls at 3:30." Do you make the best possible use of e-mail AUTORESPONDERS? And do you update all of your forms of communication to match your current schedule? People are very understanding of the fact that you are out of town for the winter holidays or in a week-long seminar -- as long as you let them know.

DO YOU ANTICIPATE PROBLEMS?

There is a big difference in the world of customer service between handling a problem well when it comes up and PREVENTING that problem from ever occurring in the first place. If you know that your website is going to be down for a week while you switch hosts, let people know that in advance -- send out an e-mail and post a big message on your home page. If you know that you aren't going to be able to keep a promise you made, say so. When you realize that your newsletter isn't going to get out on time this month, give everyone a heads up. Always ask yourself, "Will people COMPLAIN about this?" If the answer is "yes," cut those complaints off at the pass by keeping your customers informed. Nine times out of ten, people only complain because they were caught OFF GUARD -- if you let them know what to EXPECT, most people are happy to work around the bumps in the road.

DO YOU STAND BY YOUR GUARANTEES?

This is the most important part of providing good customer service. When you back your products and services up with solid guarantee, your CREDIBILITY automatically shoots through the roof. Offer your clients something tangible -- their money back, a free gift, a discount off of their next purchase, etc. Chances are, few people will actually take you up on your guarantee -- so it's not going to cost you a ton of money. And many times, even those customers who were dissatisfied with your services will refer you clients in the future, based on your guarantee. Besides, the sense of being TAKEN CARE OF that your customers will receive from your offer -- and their subsequent loyalty to your company -- will be well worth any temporary monetary expense.

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Ramona Creel is a Professional Organizer and the founder of [OnlineOrganizing.com](http://www.onlineorganizing.com) -- a web-based one-stop shop offering everything that you need to get organized at home or at work. At [OnlineOrganizing.com](http://www.onlineorganizing.com), you may get a referral to an organizer near you, shop for the latest organizing products, get tons of free tips, and even learn how to become a professional organizer or build your existing organizing business. And if you would like to read more articles about organizing your life or building your business, get a free subscription to the "Get Organized" and "Organized For A Living" newsletters. Please visit <http://www.onlineorganizing.com> or contact Ramona directly at <mailto:ramona@onlineorganizing.com> for more information.

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