

Customer Service - Don't Wait, Anticipate!

By Tanja Rosteck

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Tanja Rosteck
tanja@words4nerds.com

Words4Nerds <http://www.words4nerds.com>

CUSTOMER SERVICE - DON'T WAIT, ANTICIPATE!

For small businesses - especially one-person operations like Words4Nerds - working efficiently is essential, because you wear so many different hats and there's limited time to wear each one. Customer service is often put on the back burner because it takes time and isn't "fun". Trouble is, if you don't give enough attention to customer service, soon you'll have all the free time in the world - because you won't have any customers left to serve.

Don't wait for customers to contact you with problems - anticipate! The five tips below will help you minimize the amount of time required for customer service tasks while *maximizing* customer satisfaction. Sounds impossible? It's not!

CANNED RESPONSES - THE HIGH-TECH WAY

Auto-responders are one of the best customer service tools out there. An auto-responder sends a pre-defined reply, usually instantly, whenever someone sends an e-mail to a specific account. For example, a customer sends an e-mail to support@yourcompany.com, and 20 seconds later gets a polite reply stating your company's support team has received their e-mail request and will be contacting them within 6 hours to resolve the issue.

They can do a lot more than simply tell customers you're out of the office until next Thursday! Auto-responders are ideal for streamlining many customer service tasks, such as providing information, doing regular follow-ups, saying thank-you for feedback, and so on. Sure, customers know they're getting a canned response... but isn't it better than no response at all?

ELIMINATE THE GUESSWORK

It sounds obvious, but make your key customer service information clearly available and easy to understand. For example, a buyer wants to return your product after using it (a typical customer service "fire"). If your online ordering system clearly states your return policy *before* the customer confirms their purchase, however, the majority of customers probably won't bug you after the fact.

Spell it all out *clearly* on your website, invoices, and product information sheets, so there's absolutely no guesswork involved. Hey, and why not create an auto-responder, so anyone who

sends an e-mail to customerservice@yourcompany.com gets a reply that clearly states the return policy again?

KEEP YOUR SUPPORT FAQ'S UPDATED

Why should customers have to wait until your product breaks down to get help? They shouldn't! It's a waste of their time and yours, and it decreases efficiency because you have to drop everything when a service call comes in.

Maintaining support or service FAQ's on your website is an easy way to cut down on calls. Make it known that you post updated fixes to your website immediately, and that customers should always check it first because it'll probably resolve their problem faster than calling would. Why not make it easy for them by adding a "See our latest support news!" link directly in your program's menus or help file?

TRACK ALL REQUESTS

It may seem like a waste of time to track every customer service call you get, but it's really not. After a month or two, you'll be able to see exactly why customers are contacting you - and once you know the causes of the requests, you can take steps to reduce them.

It doesn't have to be fancy or expensive - a simple support-tracking system is better than none at all. Even knowing that approximately half of your calls are about your shipping policy tells you your website content may need to be re-written or clarified. Effective customer service means not only fixing problems when they arise, but *preventing* them from happening again (especially to the same customer!).

PARTING IS SUCH SWEET SORROW...

Every time you speak with a customer, don't hang up the phone until you've asked, "Do you have any other questions or concerns at this time?" Tackle potential problems head-on rather than waiting for the customer to call back. Don't just assume the customer will ask if it's important enough - take the lead and ask them yourself.

A satisfied customer feels they were well taken-care of and that you appreciate their business. Show it by anticipating their customer service needs!

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