



GOOD SERVICE RULES

26 Rules of Outstanding
Customer Service

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Introduction

Anyone who owns a business should know how important customer service is, especially in today's increasingly competitive business world where it's crucial to embrace every chance you get to stay one step ahead of your competitors.

However, knowing exactly what methods and strategies to employ for the best possible results isn't always easy. There are many potential pitfalls, and even smaller mistakes in customer service can snowball into large issues if not dealt with properly. Hopefully, by reading this guide you'll have a good idea about why you should make customer service a priority, as well as exactly how to go about it.

Among other things, you'll learn:

- What good customer service is all about, and why it's something you should prioritize in your business
- The potential dangers of not putting enough effort into your customer service
- How good customer service often leads to increased sales
- How to structure your customer service routines so it's easy for customers to get in touch with you, minimizing frustration and delays
- What you and your staff should keep in mind when interacting with customers, and the mindset required to be able to offer stellar customer service
- How to ensure your employees deliver the best possible customer service, and what you can personally do to ensure customer satisfaction
- Why you must always be on the lookout for things to improve, and how to get ideas and feedback directly from customers
- ...and much more!

What is Good Customer Service?

Good customer service is all about making the customer associate your business with positive feelings. It's about going that extra mile that your competitors aren't willing to. There are many ways to accomplish this, and of course the ideal methods and strategies vary a lot depending on what kind of business you have. What they all have in common is focusing on the customers' needs, ensuring they always come first.

Good customer service means being able to connect a customer with the ideal solution for their situation. Through experience and knowledge of your business you should be able to recognize the best fit for any given scenario, and answer any questions or objections that may come up in the process.

It also means being available after the sale has been made, ensuring that the customer is happy and that everything is working as it should. In some cases it means following up with them by reaching out, in others it just means being responsive on the support channels offered.

On the other end of the spectrum are those companies that never seem to care much about their customers. Usually they're large corporations that don't have to worry much about competition, or their customers taking their business elsewhere, because often in those situations the customers have little choice. That's why these huge companies can get away with offering poor customer service and still keep making mind blowing profits year after year.

Other businesses are simply ignorant about the advantages of good customer service, perhaps only seeing the upfront costs and work required, ignoring the long term advantages. No doubt about it; stellar customer service always comes at a price. From employing enough staff to minimize waiting to constantly testing and tweaking routines to make them the best they can possibly be, it's no wonder that some figure they'll just stick to the basics and hope it will work out anyway.

Only doing the basics when it comes to customer service is often shooting yourself in the foot, however. By not going that extra mile for a customer, you're giving them one less reason to come back to buy more from your

business. They're also less likely to recommend you to their friends, unless you've really impressed them with something else.

Why put so much effort into customer service?

Focusing on delivering excellent customer service is, as we have established, one of the best ways to separate yourself from the competition. While it may not always be viable to, say, lower prices in order to increase sales, just about any business can improve their customer service to gain a better reputation and thereby increase sales over time.

It's definitely not a quick fix, but sticking with it over the long term is virtually guaranteed to yield measureable results, if nothing else in how much repeat business you get (customers usually go back to places that have treated them well in the past, and recommend them to their friends).

Another reason is that customer service is not just about offering support and help post-sales - it's often required to even make the sale in the first place. That's true for all kinds of businesses, but online and offline. Consider an online e-commerce store - a customer may have to reach out to customer service to inquire about a specific product before finalizing their order, or they may need some help making their payment. Either way, if the customer service response isn't up to par, they're likely to abandon their cart and buy from another store where they get better service.

All in all it just makes sense to put some major effort into this aspect of business, because the rewards are great and it is also just plain essential to running a successful company.

Takeaways

- Good customer service is all about making customers associate your brand with positive feelings
- Being able to cater to each customer's specific needs before and during the sale is part of the equation, as is being available for them after the sale to help out and resolve any problems they may have
- Some large corporations can get away with poor customer service, but for most businesses it is essential to make it a priority

- Good customer service usually comes at a high cost, but if executed properly the long term gains should more than make up for it
- By putting the least possible effort into customer service you risk losing customers to competitors who work harder at it

26 Rules of Outstanding Customer Service

Getting in touch with you

1. Stay open after regular office hours

While in the past it may have been sufficient to only keep customer service open during regular office hours, that is really starting to become more of an exception these days. Today, customers simply expect more, especially from online businesses which are technically open around the clock. Most people work all day and cannot find the time to make personal calls while on the job, so keeping customer service open after 5 pm for when they've gotten off work is essential.

International businesses should consider keeping their customer service open 24/7. Otherwise it can be very frustrating for a customer who lives in a different time zone to find out that the only time they can get someone on the phone is during the time they're normally asleep. There is, of course, a cost involved in keeping customer service open at all times, so it may be a good idea to try to gather statistics on when it's the most active and plan accordingly. Employees should ideally never have to sit around without anything to do, so if that happens frequently you should definitely try to improve the situation.

2. Make contacting you easy and frictionless

Most of us have had at least one experience with a company who thought it appropriate to let their customers navigate a maze of vague choices just to get someone on the phone or be able to send them an e-mail. There are numerous reasons why companies do this: one is that it increases friction so fewer customers will actually bother going through the trouble of contacting them, and it also acts as a categorization system for incoming complains and questions so the appropriate department can deal with them directly.

While the latter might not be such a bad thing, trying to introduce friction to reduce the need for customer service may actually be counterproductive. Say there's a dissatisfied customer who's about to contact you with a complaint they need you to handle. However, due to the complicated process they're simply unable to. Do you think they'll come back to do business with you again?

Probably not. What may have been an excellent chance for you to rectify the problem elegantly, and gain a lifelong loyal customer thanks to your excellent service, will instead cause you to lose this customer forever. It is also likely that he or she will vent elsewhere, to friends and possibly on online forums and review sites.

3. Don't rely too heavily on automation

In the previous section we discussed how making the customer jump through various hoops to contact you can lead to dissatisfaction. Another reason why companies make their customers go through a lengthy process to contact them is because they want to automate their customer service as much as possible. The idea is to help the customer find the answer to their problem without having to involve an actual human support agent.

Now, some degree of automation is actually good for both the company and its customers. Simple issues can be resolved quickly without having to wait for someone to answer the phone or respond to an e-mail. However, many companies take it too far and make it more or less impossible to sidestep the automated process and get in touch with a real human. Automation should be a complement to the regular, old-fashioned customer service, not a replacement.

4. Adapt to mobile technology

If 10 or 15 years ago it became clear that every business needs a website, so it's becoming clear today that a business who isn't embracing mobile technology will soon fall way behind their competitors. It starts with optimizing their existing website for mobile devices, but that's not the end of it. The whole customer service process should be functioning well on mobile to be properly prepared for the future.

One thing that is quick and easy to implement is direct linking to a support number via "click to call". It's also critical to ensure that e-mailing can be done through a mobile-ready online form, not requiring the user to go through the trouble of starting an e-mail program on their phone (if they even have one). If you can do anything to reduce the amount of typing needed then that's sure to be appreciated too, as typing can be quite cumbersome on mobile devices.

Also, lots of people use their phones for social media, so having the option of contacting you through Twitter or Facebook could also be a great idea to cater to mobile users.

5. Try to offer fast response times

Let's face it: if there's one thing that's universally appreciated among customers, it's fast response times when they need to contact customer service. Few things will seem so impressive to customers as getting a response to an e-mail within just a couple of minutes, especially if it's after regular office hours and they weren't expecting a response until the next day.

The same goes for the phone. Most people these days expect to get stuck waiting on hold for a long time before actually getting their problem resolved, and if you were to let a service rep pick up the phone immediately when they call then that's another thing that will stay with them and keep them coming back to your business.

Failing to provide fast response times can actually be detrimental to your whole customer service operation. No matter how good you are with rest of it, if you cannot answer e-mails and phone calls within a reasonable time, it will still lead to frustrated and angry customers.

Interacting with customers

6. Treat customers with respect

Sooner or later, when dealing with a large number of customers, it is inevitable to run into a disagreement that just cannot be resolved properly. Anyone who's been in business for a while has had these "impossible" customers, and it's never fun for anyone involved, especially if you're confident that you are right and the customer is simply wrong.

The truth is that in the real world, customers are NOT always right. Sometimes they just can't be pleased no matter what you do, and when that happens it is important to keep in mind that even if you disagree with them, you can still try to respect their position and do your best to cater to their wishes. Maybe you can meet them halfway? Sometimes it may be helpful to consider that there are two sides to everything, and while you may deem the customer completely unreasonable, they may think the exact same thing about you.

7. Consider going multilingual

If you run an online business, chances are your customers are spread out all over the globe. Most are probably able to communicate decently in English, but not all of them. You may want to consider offering support to these customers in their native language, providing they make up a big enough slice of your overall sales of course.

If you don't want to hire dedicated support staff to service only those languages, consider looking for employees who are fluent in more than one language. That way you don't have to hire any extra staff, so there will be no added cost, but you still get the benefit of being able to communicate with customers in their native language.

Just don't make the mistake of trying to use an automated service like Google Translate to send out responses in other languages. The results are often completely indecipherable and it will likely harm your brand rather than strengthen it.

8. Don't treat customer service as a sales channel

If there's one thing people hate, it's reaching out for help only to receive a sales pitch instead. Instead of getting a solution to their problem, they're told they need to buy or upgrade to product X to solve it. Never do this unless there is absolutely no way around it (like if a person has bought a new TV and can't hook it up to their Bluray without buying an adapter). Otherwise keep the sales talk out of customer service.

Customer service should always be focused on solving the needs of your customers, not the needs of your own business. If customers sense that you're putting your own interests ahead of theirs, they will not look favorably on your company.

The exception is when dealing with customers pre-sales, such as answering questions they might have before buying a certain product or service. In that case the line between sales and customer service is blurred, and it would of course be silly (and stupid!) not to treat it as the sales channel it really is.

9. Educate your customers

If you're in a field that's rapidly evolving and changing (really, which field isn't these days?), chances are many of your customers will be unable to keep up with all the new developments. For instance, if you run an online store it is likely that the way it works today is completely different compared to how it would've worked 10 years ago.

From just browsing around the store, to adding products to a shopping cart and checking out, there are many things that can seem confusing for someone who hasn't been keeping up with the latest technology. It is your responsibility to adapt your customer service to this, making sure you can quickly and easily address any questions or complaints your customers might have. If you can help them understand how everything works and increase their confidence, then that's a customer service success.

In some fields it may make sense for both marketing and customer service purposes to offer free training, like handbooks and instructional videos. Say you sell an especially efficient type of vacuum cleaner; maybe it would make sense to put out a video series on how to clean your house with the least amount of effort. You'd be educating your customers and marketing your product at the

same time, and hopefully people will appreciate the advice you give them and go on to buy one of your vacuum cleaners. That's how good customer service can sometimes also lead to increased sales!

10. Avoid relying on scripts

Something that can be extremely annoying when talking to a customer service agent is when they insist on sticking to a script. Every issue is different, so how could a script possibly cater to every situation? The answer is it can't, yet some businesses fail to recognize this and stare themselves blind at the perceived increased efficiency in customer service.

However, while some cases may actually be handled faster and better with a script, a big portion of them won't. In fact, in those cases using a script will be quite counterproductive, and ultimately lead to a frustrated customer.

A good solution may be offering ready-made scripts for *some* situations, but telling your staff to not go into a script before they've made sure that particular script is actually relevant and likely to solve the problem the customer is having. For everything else they should avoid using scripts, and you're better off training them in how to ask the right questions in order to quickly establish the root cause of the problem. Not only will this lead to high customer satisfaction because most issues will be resolved, regardless of whether they're mentioned in a script or not, but it will also make the customer feel like your business cares enough about them to actually *talk to them* and not just read off a script.

11. Say "yes" as often as possible

Customers don't like being told that whatever they need help with cannot be done. Even if their request seems somewhat out of the normal range of service you offer, you should try to say 'yes' and help them out if it's not too inconvenient for you. Going that extra mile to ensure their satisfaction is sure not to go unnoticed, and the next time they're in the market for whatever you're selling they're likely to come back to the guy who went through all that trouble to help them the last time.

As the boss it's easy to know what your business can and cannot do for its customer, but your customer service reps may not be so sure. In fact they might hesitate going that extra mile for customers unless they've been specifically

told to (and rightly so, they shouldn't make promises that your business can't deliver on). That's why you should try to cover these scenarios during their training, and let them know that if they feel uncertain about something they can just come to you and ask.

12. Let customers know you appreciate their business

Sometimes it's easy to feel like you're just a walking dollar sign to the business you're dealing with. It's especially common when dealing with larger, faceless corporations, but sometimes it happens even with smaller companies. This is definitely something you should try to avoid.

The trick is making sure you treat each and every customer like an individual and letting them know that you appreciate and value their business. It could be as simple as just writing something like that in your e-mail correspondence - a little usually goes a long way. Another good idea is using their name to further validate them as a real person. You need to make it sound sincere though, and be very careful not to overdo it, otherwise it may actually have the opposite effect. Customers are usually able to tell if you actually mean what you say, or if you're just trying to win their affection by telling them what they want to hear.

13. Exceed expectations

Whenever you get the chance, go the extra mile and exceed the expectations you think the customer has. If you can manage to actually impress a customer with your service, chances are they will stick with your business for a long time. The truth is most customers are used to not exactly getting the royal treatment from companies they deal with, so whenever they run into a business that makes them feel like VIP's, they're sure to remember it.

What exceeding their expectations actually means in practice will vary a lot depending on the situation. It could be offering them some sort of compensation if they've been inconvenienced, or something as simple as responding faster to an e-mail than they could reasonably expect. Don't be afraid to experiment a bit with this to see what your customers respond to.

14. Know when to cut your losses

Sometimes you just have to accept that a person just isn't a good fit as a customer of your business. Maybe they expect something you just can't deliver, or they're just plain difficult and unreasonable to deal with. If that happens, it's usually a better idea to just refund their money, thank them for their time and let them go. Otherwise you risk spending countless hours trying to rectify whatever's bothering them, only to find it didn't matter in the end and they still weren't satisfied.

This course of action should not be a common occurrence if your customer service is up to par, but sometimes it's just plain necessary. The good news is, some customers will actually be impressed by this, since it'll show them that you are a professional who'd rather part on good terms with a customer than do everything to keep their money, even if they're not satisfied. Of course handling the refund process quickly and smoothly is key to this.

15. Offer surprise gifts and bonuses

An unexpected surprise or bonus can make a huge impact on how a customer feels about your business. Getting customers to feel good is arguably one of the key aspects to a successful business, because being associated with good feelings in their minds means they will most likely return to buy from you again in the future.

How you should go about doing this in practice will vary depending on what your business is. It could be something simple, like including a small gift with every package you send out from your online store. Obviously it shouldn't be anything too fancy or expensive, but rather just something that lets them you that you care about them as customers and value their business.

You and your employees

16. Know your business

The best way to ensure the answers and help you provide to your customer is accurate is knowing your business, and the products/services it sells, inside and out. You (and your employees) should strive to know every little aspect of it in order to best serve your customers, and connect them with the solution that is right for their particular needs.

Being unable to answer a question from a customer without first consulting a manual (or even worse, Google) leaves them with a poor impression of your company, because to them it will seem like you don't know what you're talking about. On the other hand, if you seem like you know just about everything when they ask you, the opposite will be true and they'll be highly likely to trust your knowledge and opinions.

17. Reward employees who perform well

Offering rewards and bonuses to employees who perform well is usually a great idea. In the customer service department, however, you need to make sure you're not just rewarding your service reps based on the number of cases they've handled successfully in a given period of time. The reason is probably obvious: this would encourage your staff to only do the bare minimum to resolve as many issues as possible, never going that extra mile that ensures customers come back to your business.

If you have the means to do it, try to set it up so you can easily gauge customer satisfaction (for example by sending out surveys). Then, base your rewards and bonuses on the actual feedback you get from your customers. That should lead to better customer service overall.

18. Deliver on your promises

This may seem like a given, but it's important to mention anyway. Never promise more than you can actually keep, or you'll end up with some extremely disgruntled customers. Breaking a promise you've made is sure to turn a customer off from doing any more business with you, and it just isn't worth it.

If anything it's always better to under-promise and over-deliver. If you're not sure you can deliver on something, better be safe than sorry and tell them you probably cannot do it. If it later turns out you actually *can* do it, they're likely to be pleasantly surprised and feel like you've really done your best to help them out.

19. Learn to apologize frequently

When something goes wrong, apologize. Even if it's just something minor, like a one day delay in shipping an item to a customer. Apologizing is just another way of showing that you accept responsibility and that you, as a business owner, care about your customers.

In fact, you should probably make a point of including an apology in every interaction with a customer when it's been established that they have a problem that is directly or indirectly caused by you or your company. It doesn't require much effort, but will go a long way towards making the customer a bit less hostile.

Don't overdo this one though, as it only works if it seems like you're being sincere. People are often able to tell when you're not being honest and you're just telling them what they want to hear, so try to make sure you really do mean what you say.

20. Own up to your mistakes

Everyone makes mistakes - including business owners and customer service reps. What's important is to never try to put the blame on someone else. As a business owner, mistakes are your responsibility, even if they weren't directly caused by you. Own up to them and try to resolve them without causing a fuzz; that's really all you can do.

It may be tempting to tell a customer that "oh it's this and that person's fault, they're new here", but the reality is that customers really don't care about that. They care about getting their problem solved, and want to know that you (the business owner) are on the case, even if you didn't personally cause the problem in the first place.

Sometimes it's also a good idea to assume responsibility even if the fault actually lies with the customer. Putting the blame on them is a sure way to get them defensive, and by not doing that you may be able to turn an otherwise unpleasant interaction into something much better for all parties involved.

21. Treat your customer service reps well

You should, of course, treat all your employees well, but it's often a good idea to take extra care keeping your customer service reps happy. If they're not happy they will likely provide poor service to your customers, directly affecting your business for the worse. A good rule of thumb is trying to treat your employees like you want them to treat your customers.

That's why it just makes sense to pay them a decent wage and offer them a good working environment. Working in customer service can be quite difficult and draining, so keep that in mind when you're evaluating their performance.

If someone makes a mistake, let them know how to fix it but don't be too hard on them. The most important thing is making sure they learn something from it and don't repeat it in the future.

22. Take complaints and criticism to heart

When a customer comes to you with a complaint, you have three choices. You can choose to ignore it completely (probably not a good idea). You can rectify the problem and hope it doesn't happen again. Or, you can try to learn something from it to prevent it from happening again.

It's easy to get defensive when someone complains about your business, especially if they're harsh about it. However, by just changing your perspective from treating it like a personal attack to a helpful lesson, you can find that complaints and criticism are two of the best allies you have in perfecting and growing your business.

From time to time there will also be complaints that are completely unfounded, and those are obviously safe to just ignore. Some customers are probably mostly looking to vent, and those are unlikely to be of use to you for improvement purposes. Listen to their complaints with a smile and move on!

23. Anticipate problems and establish routines to handle them

After you've been in business a while, you probably have a pretty good idea what the most common issues are, and what most customers reach out to your customer service for. To ensure your customer service is as efficient as possible, try establishing routines for all these common issues. That way your customer service reps know exactly what to do when they encounter one of them, and they can handle it in the most efficient manner.

Of course not all problems can be anticipated and categorized, but perhaps you can at least anticipate part of the problems. Say you run an online store - there are many things that can go wrong with your payment systems, so it's impossible to establish routines for every possible scenario. However, maybe it would be possible to categorize the issues into "credit card payments", "Paypal payments" and so on. Then establish routines to handle those things. It may never be perfect, but it is a lot better than starting from complete scratch with every issue that arises.

24. Get involved personally

When building up a business it can often be tempting to take the less fun parts (like, say, customer service) and hire others to handle it for us as soon as we're able to afford it. However, when we do that we also lose the ability to stay directly in touch with what customers think about the business. Sure, customer service reps could technically relay some of it to you, but it won't be the same as talking to the customers yourself.

That's why it can often be a good idea to set aside some time, maybe once a week, or month, where you do some customer service work personally. That way you can get a feel for how everything is working, and you'll get firsthand information straight from the source. It will also allow you to better understand what your service reps are facing in their daily work, and you may even find yourself appreciating them more when you realize what they deal with every day.

25. Learn from customer feedback

Every interaction you and your staff has with a customer is an opportunity to get genuine feedback and learn how you can improve your business. A big mistake that lots of companies make is ignoring the feedback they're getting

from customers, either because they think they know better themselves or because they don't have the routines in place to record and make proper use of it.

Either way, there's no excuse not to treat customer feedback as the gold it is. Make sure there is a simple way for your support staff to log suggestions for improvements that they receive from customers. Even a disgruntled customer that may never buy anything from you again can potentially give you some great pointers to ensure that whatever happened in their case will not happen again with someone else.

To really get the most out of the feedback you receive you must also remember to never take any of it personally (unless it's specifically about you, of course!). Every business has its fair share of angry customers, and you can't let them get to you. Just analyze the feedback you get from them objectively and determine if there's anything you can learn from it - if not, just let it go.

26. Never stop improving

The quest for great customer service is one that never ends. Every business needs to stay on their toes, always looking for things they can improve, if they want to stay competitive. Becoming complacent and not caring enough will lead to customers simply taking their business elsewhere.

The easiest way to keep improving is to set a goal for each month - one thing that could be better with your customer service. Do everything else as usual but focus on implementing or correcting this one thing. At the end of the month, evaluate how it went and decide whether the change was for the better or if it actually made things worse. After a few years of doing this your customer service will be world class, way ahead of those that stopped improving once they got their basic routines in place years ago.

Takeaways

- Contacting your business should be as easy and frictionless as possible - avoid complicated automated procedures and focus on putting the customer in touch with a customer service rep as fast as possible

- Respect your customers and treat them as individuals, not dollar signs
- Recognize that each situation is different and it is impossible to rely on rigid scripts when striving for good customer service; it is, however, possible to anticipate most needs and set up routines to handle them efficiently
- Try to go beyond the customer's expectations, but never make any promises you cannot deliver
- It is okay to "cut your losses" with especially difficult customers, just make sure you are able to refund or compensate them
- Knowing your business and field inside and out is essential to be able to provide good customer service
- Treat your customer service employees well and they're likely to do the same when dealing with customers
- Admit it immediately when you've made a mistake, and offer a sincere apology
- The best way to improve is asking customers for feedback and taking it to heart; also remember that there are always things you can do better, and you must always strive to improve to stay ahead of your competitors

Conclusion

Hopefully by now you should have a pretty good idea about why customer service is important, and how to go about it for the best possible results. In the end it's all about trying to cater to the individual needs of your customers, and as long as you have that goal in mind everything should be reasonably straightforward. Of course there should be a balance between your business goals and customer needs, but when you're doing customer service right you'll notice that those two things do not have to be mutually exclusive. In fact, putting more effort into customer service often leads to increased sales over time.

Remember that no matter how good your customer service might be, there's always room for improvement. It's when you stop trying to better yourself that you risk being overtaken by competitors who are willing to go that extra mile for their customers. Use feedback you get from your customers to learn exactly what they deem important and how you can do things better, and evaluate the state of things as often as possible. That way you'll always be moving forward, and hopefully in the right direction.

Also, don't be discouraged if you're not seeing tangible results from your increased efforts in customer service. Done right it will lead to more repeat business and an increase in referrals from customers recommending you to their friends and family, but you must allow some time for that to happen and you won't notice the difference in the short term.

Good luck!