



Your Passport to Professionalism: Module 4

Your Customer

Step 1—Learn

Introduction

Your **customer** is whoever benefits from the work you do. You will have two kinds of customers: **internal customers**, who comprise the members of your work team, and **external customers**, who are looking to you for help.

This module explores customer-employee relationships by giving you some ideas for how to deal effectively with any customer.

The customer is always...the customer

Good customer service requires the right response regardless of the type of customer you encounter. The old saying, "The customer is always right," is actually wrong. Customers, especially unhappy customers, can behave inappropriately, make inappropriate assumptions about the situation, and demand inappropriate solutions. Nevertheless, there are ways you can work with all of your customers to keep your interactions professional and positive.

Listen

Is there anything more exasperating than telling the organizational representative what you need only to discover that you have to repeat it again? From a customer's point of view, probably not. Whether you are on the phone or face-to-face with your customer, *how well you listen is critical to good service*. Let your customers talk, and show signs of active listening, like brief interjections, clarifying questions, or suggestions about how to solve the problem.

Did you know that most of us only listen to about 25% of what we hear? We can undermine our own ability to listen by *adding*



our own *internal noise* to the communication. Here are some ways that can happen.

- One way is by *letting our biases color what we hear*. Biases might include prejudging a customer by his or her appearance, attitude, accent, or language.
- For a variety of reasons, we might *assume we know the customer's needs* before we actually hear them out.
- Do you ever plan your response to people who are speaking while they are still talking? That is *pseudo-listening*, another practice that keeps us from listening completely.

TIP: Reinforce listening to your customer by taking brief **notes**. Your notes will allow you to reflect back on your customer's key points. When you repeat those key points to the customer, he or she will be gratified that you paid attention. You will also have notes to use remind you how to follow up.

Probe

In addition to letting your customer have his or her say, meeting the customer's needs often requires that you probe for more information. When a customer asks you a general question, you can save both you and your customer time and energy *by clarifying the request* before you give an answer.

[Overheard in the library]

"I need an article on Soccer."

"Is the article for an assignment or for pleasure reading?"

"It's for an assignment."

"Does your instructor require you to use a particular type of source such as peer reviewed journals, popular sports magazines, or current newspapers?"

"It has to be a report on a research study."

"Then you want a peer reviewed journal. Let me show you how to find an article."



When you listen well and probe for complete information, you:

- Figure out what your *customer wants and needs*
- *Gather clues* about way to improve the service you provide
- *Prevent misunderstanding* and errors
- *Build strong relationships* with your customers for the long-term

Believe Your Customer

When in doubt about what customers are telling you, **believe them** (at least until you can confirm their claims). Sometimes the customer's claim you initially thought was 100% wrong will turn out to be right. This will save you from eating a lot of Humble Pie.

[Overheard at a reception desk] *“Let’s check the calendar to verify what you saw. Sure enough—that’s the wrong date and time. Thanks for pointing this out to me. I’ll make sure we get the calendar corrected.”*

[Overheard in the computer lab] *“I see why your professor failed to get your email. The file you tried to send was too large to go through. Here’s what we can do...”*

TIP: Have you ever had an employee treat you like a dummy or use a condescending tone of voice? If so, then you know how demeaning it feels. Monitor your words and tone so that you don’t inadvertently communicate, “Only an idiot wouldn’t understand this.”

Help Them Understand

After you have listened to your customer, you might have a chance to fill in whatever gaps there are in the customer’s understanding of how you will meet their needs. *Giving your customers the big picture* generally will help them work with you more effectively. Showing them how to help speed the process along in the future will save you both time. Even if you’re in the middle of a problem that it’s too late to undo, providing customers missing information will make them feel better served.

[Overheard in the Financial Aid office] “I’m glad you brought this to our attention. The information you need is right here in your packet, but it’s buried. Let’s go through your packet and see if I can point out any other issues that might concern you.”

TIP: Never try this strategy with an angry customer. **You can’t educate customers when they are irate.** Choosing to reeducate at the wrong moment is a sure way to make the customer madder. (Imagine saying this to a stressed and angry customer: “You know, you could have avoided all of this if you had brought your paperwork in on time.”) Look for ways to avoid embarrassing any customer, but especially angry customers.

Dealing With Unhappy Customers

Having a process to resolve complaints helps you deal with both the emotional and practical aspects of the issue. These guidelines will work in most situations. Your supervisor can tell you if there are any specific procedures for dealing with unhappy customers in your department.

Greet

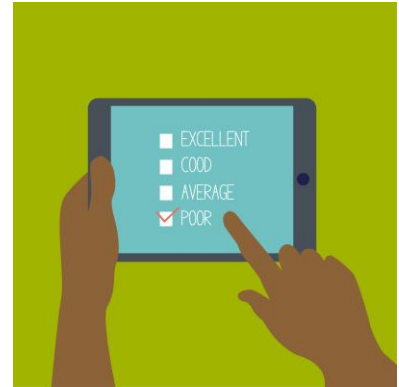
Even when an approaching customer is scowling and fuming, greet the person as though you are happy to see them. Begin in a friendly way. This is easy to say, but can be difficult to do, but it is your first step in neutralizing the situation.

Don’t Take It Personally

Be a neutral audience. Remember that the customer is angry at the situation, not you.

Listen

Sometimes the irate customer just wants someone to listen to the story, even if you are unable to help. It can be challenging to listen thoroughly to grievances, especially if you often hear the same complaints. Nevertheless, it's critical when you are dealing with angry customers. Try your best to *separate previous negative experiences from this customer contact*.



- Give them the **opportunity to vent** some of their frustration. Usually venting takes only a minute.
- Listen for both **facts and feelings**.
- **Be empathetic**. “That must have been frustrating.”
- **Show signs of active listening**, like brief interjections or clarifying questions. “I see.”
- **Don’t start responding too quickly**. Give the customer time to get the whole story out.

TIP: Research indicates that if you don’t interrupt an angry customer, the average time they will complain is about 1 minute. You must let them complete their complaint or they will keep complaining.

It is common for an angry customer’s story to be a jumble of accusations and emotions. The claims the customer is making may sound doubtful or far-fetched. *Don’t assume* that it is. Give them the benefit of the doubt: There are several possible reasons for the miscommunication:

- They may just be *doing a poor job of explaining* what happened or what they need.
- They could be *describing the situation as they perceived* it without intending to mislead.
- They *may have been confused* by the original information.
- They *may not have received information* they should have gotten.

You will help yourself and your customer manage the situation successfully if you *listen patiently and help your customer clarify his or her facts and feelings*, needs and concerns.

Step 1: Summarize what they said

A very important step in defusing an angry customer is to summarize the complaint, and ask them “did I understand you correctly?” For example, after a customer complains about not being notified of an important deadline, you might say:

“You are upset because we told you that we would email you when the deadline arrived, but you did not receive a notice from us. Is this correct?” Wait until they say “yes” or give you more clarification. Repeat what you heard so that they know you understand their complaint.

Step 2: Empathize

Rather than immediately looking for a solution, simply say

"I can understand why you would be upset. That would upset me too." Or...

"I understand that it bothered you." Or...

"I'm really sorry that you had to go through that. It must have been very frustrating."

Remember, this is not accepting blame or agreeing with their complaint. It's simply showing them that you heard them and understand why they are upset.

Step 3: Ask how they would like to resolve it

Rather than *telling* them what you can do, simply ask "How can we resolve this for you?" Or, "What would you like us to do?" Then wait for their suggestion. If it's a reasonable request, then you can do what they want and it will be solved. If the request is unreasonable you simply say, "I don't have the ability to do what you ask, but here's what I *can* do for you." Explain what you can do, and ask, "is this OK with you?"

Once you arrive at a workable solution, thank them.

"Thank you for telling us about this. We appreciate it when people let us know how to improve our services."

- **Respond as an understanding friend** rather than citing policies.
- **Make the resolution seem as easy as possible.**
- **Be firm but understanding** with your answers.

As a last resort, offer to have your supervisor talk to the customer. Your supervisor may say the same things as you, but sometimes hearing it from someone else has a positive effect.

Follow Through

Often, complaints cannot be resolved during the first point of contact. If you need to get back to the customer do so quickly and thoroughly. Even if the complaint has been resolved, *create a reason to contact the customer again*. For example, find a way to give added value.

If the problem is likely to happen again with another customer, look for ways to solve the root causes of the problem. Think about how your unit's policies or procedures could be changed to make sure the issue doesn't return.

In closing

You can show your customer who comes in with complaints that you have a *genuine desire to help* by keeping a friendly demeanor, listening carefully, probing for details, and explaining how you can address the issue. Check to make sure the customer understands the solution and is as satisfied as possible. Keeping these principles in mind will help you to ameliorate, rather than deteriorate the difficult situation.