

Common Customer Service Mistakes to Fix ASAP



By MICAH SOLOMON

Customer service is not always easy to pull off, and it's certainly not something that “just takes care of itself” or is “just common sense.” However, there are some parts of delivering great customer service—or, more accurately, avoiding poor customer service—that are straightforward, easy to fix, and high-impact. Here, I'll highlight a handful of these customer service “worst practices” and provide an achievable solution for each that can get your customer service back on track.



Mistake: Telling a customer that they've reached the “wrong” employee and making them start over with someone else. Customers shouldn't have to learn your company's organizational chart in order to get assistance, and at great companies, they don't. At a superb healthcare institution like Mayo Clinic, if a family member is in distress about how their loved one's treatment is going and asks, say, someone in housekeeping for help, that housekeeper will get the help they need. This doesn't mean the housekeeper is going to consult on surgery or on discharge instructions, but it does mean they'll say, “absolutely I can help you with that,” and then find you someone who can help, rather than you having to conduct the search yourself. The same is true at any great hotel; they don't expect a guest to know who the right person in the organization is to take care of a particular request; rather, whichever employee receives a customer request figures out how to get it taken care of, seamlessly and without inconvenience to the guest.

Solution: Make it one of your central, publicized, enforced customer service tenets that the employee who receives a customer request owns that customer request.

Mistake: Disciplining an employee in front of customers. A customer should never be burdened with witnessing or overhearing a manager disciplining or correcting an employee. It's an interruption and awkward situation for the customer; it increases the employee's embarrassment; and you—the manager—can't really know how this little vignette will ultimately play out (for example, will the employee push back—still in public—against your discipline, causing even more of a scene?)

Solution: Keep such interactions behind the scenes. Although correcting employee errors immediately is an important way of improving employee behavior, you'll need to fudge the definition of "immediate" enough to ensure that any correction or discipline occurs out of sight and earshot of your customers.

Mistake: Pointing fingers when a problem arises. This similar to the problem above, and just as unacceptable. When something goes wrong, don't make your company look even worse by rolling around in the muck.

Solution: The solution here is both linguistic and conceptual. Teach employees that the company is "we"—"we messed up," "we dropped the ball on that," or even "I," but never "they." Even if the problem originated outside the company, there's value in moderating the language your customers use, most importantly by not bothering to assign blame externally and, if it is necessary, to do it as gently as possible (not "FedEx dropped the package off to us late" but "looks like there was a delay in receiving the package here.")

Mistake: Making customers feel like an interruption. While it's true that that being able to interact with your friends at work is a big part of what makes work tolerable (and, I hope, enjoyable), when a customer wants an employee's attention, it's important that they don't feel like an interruption, or like outsiders who are being excluded from an inner circle or secret society.

Solution: Set, model, and enforce the following practice: Not only must employees stop talking when a customer wants their attention, they need to use their peripheral vision—and other senses—in order to halt such conversations at least a moment prior to when a customer might realize they were on a potential collision course with an existing conversation.

For more on this topic, read NewVoiceMedia's latest consumer research on customer experience, *Serial Switchers Swayed by Sentiment*.

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