



## Customer Services: How to Give It and Get It

Whether running an online business, a hardware store or a service-oriented organization, practicing and maintaining quality customer service is the key to success for any entrepreneur. That was tough this past fiscal year, when customers around the world faced a struggling economy. Many drastically cut their budgets, paid off their debt and scraped to build their savings. As a result, when they go to make a purchase in this new era of frugality, they are demanding higher levels of service.

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From a business owner's standpoint, loyal customers are important to a company's bottom line. Studies show that repeat customers typically spend more money, generate larger transactions, refer more customers and buy a broader range of products than one-time shoppers. Maintaining a customer starts, and usually ends with, a company's customer services representatives, which is why a company must put in time to ensure their employees are operating with high standards. Many of the leaders in customer service recognize the importance of giving their employees a certain amount of freedom in how they deal with a customer's request, versus having to call in a manager for approval. Not only does this allow them to respond quicker to the customer's needs, it builds overall morale in the company.

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When times are rough, companies tend to make their biggest customer service mistakes. Taking the wrong approach to solve short-term problems can create long-lasting damage and lead to a reduction in the quality of the customers' experience. Slashing costs, cutting employee numbers or pay/benefits, or reducing investment in the free "value-added" extras—like special services a company provides—may reduce overhead, but it also deeply impacts the customer. It's important to weigh any cost-cutting measures with the total strategic differentiators of the company and ensure there's alignment.

Customers, for the most part, are walking into a store poised for a battle. When a return is needed or an adjustment is necessary, customers often start with the following mindset: "I'm sure you are not going to make this right, but..." Already on edge, the situation can escalate into a negative customer service experience before it even begins. However, key strategies can assist customer service representatives in diffusing the situation. Most importantly, representatives need to have a conversation with the customer. If customers perceive resistance or a lack of two-way communication,

they are likely to go on the defensive, or worse, find a new store.

If a customer has an issue with a business, the old adage of “the customer is always right” works for a reason. Listening without interrupting can go a long way for a customer service representative. One of the most common reasons customers get defensive is because they feel vulnerable or misunderstood. They often see themselves as small and powerless, and as a result, are unable to control the situation. This is where businesses should put the control in their customer services representatives’ hands to develop a meaningful solution for the customer. In the end, it can make a huge difference in both the customers’ day and the company’s bottom-line.