Communication Skills: The Key to Customer Service and Satisfaction

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What this is about: an example
• What do you say to someone when you have just towed their car away?

Customer service – a science, not just an “attitude”
• Your profitability depends on how you communicate with customers
• For top firms, service is a thoughtfully composed performance
• Good service revolves around specific communications techniques that are NOT human nature
• These techniques can be learned and practiced by anyone

Techniques we will cover today
• Specific techniques for handling any customer situation:
  o Reflective listening
  o Delivering feedback or bad news
  o Showing respect and empathy
  o Preventing confrontations
• How to defuse a customer crisis
• Dealing with your most challenging customer types

Question:
• A customer tells you curtly that she has been waiting for a long time for help. What should you say?
  o I'm sorry.
  o I understand.
  o We are having an extremely busy day here at the store.
  o It sounds like you had a very long wait. Let's see what we can do to help.

Making customers feel great in 30 seconds or less: reflective listening
• 1. Give your undivided attention, then respond
• 2. Paraphrase what the other person says before your reply
• 3. Share your knowledge of the situation
• 4. Provide active feedback
• 5. Summarize understanding and obtain buyoff
Question:
• What would you say *first* to a customer whose dead plant was past the warranty date?
  o The warranty has expired for your plant.
  o Let me go through the details of the warranty with you.
  o You should have come in sooner about this.
  o I am afraid that you will have to pay to replace the plant at this point.

Delivering bad news: the “staging” approach
• Introduce what you are going to say before you say it
• Explain the reason for what you are saying as you are saying it
• Empathize with the customer’s feelings after you have said it

Showing respect and empathy
• Problems are often "gift-wrapped" with the person’s feelings about them:
  o Level of urgency
  o Their expectations for solving the problem
  o How this issue makes them feel
  o How critical the problem is to them
• Respect = acknowledging someone’s problems and the agenda behind them
• Empathy = validating another person’s feelings

Techniques for showing respect and empathy
• Playback: rephrase the other person in a way that acknowledges their agenda
  o Because you ____, I am going to ____
  o Because you ____, I recommend ____
• Phrase substitution: change the wording of your standard responses (e.g. “Absolutely” instead of “OK”)
• Normalize feelings: Share common experiences and reaffirm the customer’s emotions (“Many people get frustrated about this”)

The three “octane levels” of acknowledgement
• Observation: Observe the other person’s feelings and reactions
  o “I can see how upset you are”
• Validation: Acknowledge the other person’s feelings are valid. This always involves describing other people
  o “No one likes to wait for a shipment”
• Identification: Identify with the other person’s feelings
  o “That wouldn’t seem fair to me either”

Question:
• When is it OK to say "no" to someone?
  o When they are making an unrealistic demand.
  o When they want you to take responsibility for something that is their fault.
  o Anytime you cannot give them what they want.
  o Never ever.

Managing another person’s demands - doing the “can-can”
• Always respond with what you can acknowledge and can do - however small
• Respond to the other person’s feelings – feelings are never wrong
• Focus on what is possible
• You can avoid saying “no” much more often than you think

Defusing a crisis – the “Triple A” approach
• Acknowledgement: acknowledge feelings and give the problem importance
• Assessment: gather facts and assess the situation
• Alternatives: set boundaries and sell alternatives

How to talk to any kind of customer
• The talk-a-holic
• The strong, silent type
• The non-linear thinker
• The time-waster
• The never-satisfied

Summing it all up: action items to take back to the workplace
• You can prevent or manage almost any difficult situation with the right communications skills
• It’s all about technique, not “attitude”
• These skills are not human nature, and get better with practice
• These skills translate to all of your interactions with people

Thank you!
About Rich Gallagher

Rich Gallagher is one of the nation's leading experts on communications skills. His eight nationally published books include *What to Say to a Porcupine*, a national #1 customer service and business humor bestseller and finalist for 800-CEO-READ's 2008 Business Book of the Year, as well as his latest book *How to Tell Anyone Anything: Breakthrough Techniques for Handling Difficult Conversations at Work*.

A former customer service executive as well as a popular public speaker, Rich focuses on the mechanics of what to say in difficult situations, based on the latest principles of behavioral psychology. His lengthy management career includes:

- Helping to lead a West Coast software startup to become a major NASDAQ firm as its director of customer services,
- Leading another major 24x7 call center to near-perfect customer satisfaction ratings and near-zero turnover,
- Heading his own training and development firm Point of Contact Group, where he has taught over 10,000 people how to take control of any interpersonal situation.

Rich's other books include *The Soul of an Organization* and *Smile Training Isn't Enough*, both of which were book club selections that reached the Amazon.com top 3000. He is also the subject matter expert for the American Management Association's top-selling *Communication Bootcamp* training program and a member of the National Speakers Association. Rich’s materials have been excerpted in Dale Carnegie training and elsewhere, and he is a veteran of numerous speaking engagements, media appearances and corporate workshops.

For more information on Rich Gallagher’s communications skills training programs, visit [www.pointofcontactgroup.com](http://www.pointofcontactgroup.com)

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