

In business, everyone is involved in customer service. No matter what your job title, you're also a customer service rep. For those of us in small businesses or who are sole proprietors, our customer service skills are even more important. In most cases, small businesses thrive or die based on the customer service skills of the owners and employees.

There are many articles and books that discuss the importance of providing great customer service. Very few, if any, people would argue that it's not important, but how can you help your employees (and yourself) learn techniques of great customer service?

In my customer service training seminars, one of the foundational skills we work on is empathy. Your ability to empathize may be your most important ability as a person who deals with customers. Empathy means providing caring and personal service. Dictionary.com defines empathy as "the intellectual identification with...the feelings, thoughts or attitudes of another." Empathy is your ability to truly put yourself in your customer's position so you can understand his/her frustration. Once we truly understand our customer's frustration, fears, and aggravations, we can start the process of delivering a great experience for them. Empathizing is not necessarily a lengthy process; sometimes it only takes a moment to really understand where our customer is coming from. Sometimes it takes several minutes of listening combined with empathetic statements such as "I understand why you feel that way." or "I'd feel that way, too, if I were in your situation." Regardless, until you can empathize with your customer, you're not ready to start the other aspects of customer interaction.

As a customer service person, you convey empathy when you listen for the hidden meaning in what a customer is saying, when you acknowledge the emotion, and when you offer caring assistance.

Empathy is especially important when dealing with a customer who is irritated, angry or emotional. When customers are emotional, it is difficult for them to act rationally. This is because of the way the human brain is structured. Our emotional brain, which is a relatively primitive part of the human brain called the amygdala, in essence "hijacks" the rest of our more rational, analytical brain and takes control.

To get someone out of the grip of the emotional brain (an amygdala hijack) and pass the power over to the analytical brain can be difficult, but if you remain calm and empathetic, your odds

increase of helping the emotional individual think and act more rationally.

It is important to understand this as we deal with emotional, upset or angry customers. Empathy is a remedy for calming an emotional person by simply and genuinely acknowledging the emotion that the customer feels. Empathy is very powerful because it diffuses emotion. If you want to be able to deal rationally with an emotional customer, or if you simply want to ensure that an interaction does not escalate into an emotional one, remember to use empathy. When sincerely applied, empathy works like a charm in many situations. (“Sincerely” is a key word; insincerity or condescension can actually exacerbate an emotionally charged situation.)

Here are some examples of empathy statements:

- “I can hear how frustrated you are.”
- “I can see how that would annoy you.”
- “That’s terrible!”
- “I understand how time-critical this is.”
- “I would be unhappy if that happened to me, too.”

Author and speaker Ross Shafer really gets to the heart of the matter when he points out that people don’t really want customer service as much as they want customer empathy. The same concept applies to customer support incidents. When you sincerely empathize with your customer, you convey to them a sense of caring and understanding. There’s a quote in customer service circles that says, “They don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” When a customer believes that you genuinely care about their particular situation or problem, no matter how many times you’ve heard it before, you’re well on the way to creating a satisfied customer.

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