

CUSTOMER RELATIONS

By Danielle Gault

Good customer service is about creating positive customer relations in the exchange between what the company has to offer and what the customer's needs are. If the company's product or service satisfies the customer's needs for a fair price, both parties are satisfied with the exchange.

Customer Relations deals with:

- How to understand behaviours when addressing customers' needs.
- How to understand and deal with difficult situations and people.
- How to understand and work with conflict.
- How to be a problem-solver when dealing with the customer.

If asked to describe a situation that, in your opinion, created bad customer relations generated around a customer service issue, you would most likely say the following:

Why is/was this situation handled ineffectively? What happened?	How you react/feel?
Not listened to - they gave in.	Frustration.
Couldn't get through. Tried alternate path.	Time consuming.
Incompetence.	Wanted to quit and wanted nothing to do with them.
Lack of courtesy.	Disappointment.
A rigid system.	Frustration, but my persistence eventually paid off.

Customer Relations Are Complex

Customer relations are complex because people respond differently to different communication styles and patterns of expressions. Our communication style is often driven by our personal needs. When we work with customers, we are basically addressing their needs.

Looking at Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs helps us to understand the expressed customer need which in turn allows us to manage the relationship more objectively.

Often differences in what we can do and what the customer wants from our company can create barriers that generate intangible needs. Customers want to feel safe and not threatened by the company and the service provider. Customers want to feel a friendly connection when dealing with a company and their representatives. Customers want to feel recognized and have a need to feel complete and satisfied.

LEARNING: Personal Growth Needs – this deals with our ideas about the world, our drive towards Self-Actualization and the need to reach our full potential.

POWER: Social Needs -- includes the need for Recognition and Respect (success, prestige).

AFFILIATION: Social Needs – includes a need to have a Sense of Belonging and Love (friendship, affection).

SECURITY: Physical Needs – includes Physiological Needs (food, shelter), and Security Needs (protection, order, safety).

Conflict Management

When employees get into a difficult situation it is usually because there are differences in opinions on how things are done. Conflict has two concerns which produce various degrees of positive and negative results.

1. The concern for one's self and one's position and desires.
2. The concern for the other person and that person's position and desires.

There is no easy way to develop as a mature customer service representative except through the process of doing the work with and through others. Working through the process side of customer relations will get you there.

We always have a choice on how we frame conflict. When asked to rate your conflict management style, the group average for dealing with challenging issues was as follows:

The important thing here is not to be a victim in the situation but to address issues – learn to confront, be challenged, take risks and be the one to cause some change in how things are done.

When it comes to dealing with conflict:

1. Be on the same side – try to discover and consider the other side’s needs and the reasons behind their actions or responses.
2. Be careful of your own baggage – why does this situation press your buttons – consider your own boundaries and be responsible for your own reactions. Focus your energy on the things you can control.

Wholistic Framework

Using a wholistic system for customer relations, apply the Mental, Social, and Physical sides of ourselves to solve problems. When we do this, we can proceed by using the following problem-solving approaches to address and improve customer relations patterns.

The Mental Side – Strategy #1 - DEALING WITH OUR IDEAS ABOUT CUSTOMER RELATIONS – Objectify and Analyze

Maintain objectivity – analyze what your needs are and what your intention is when dealing with difficult people. You can do this before and after your interaction with another by analyzing and objectifying the difficult person or situation. Ask yourself: What can I do to contribute to this customer in meaningful ways that make sense to them?



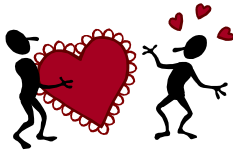
When we recognize that an angry customer feels not recognized as important, we can see that the objective of their anger is to express their “power” need. They are saying: I am important and you should recognize me as a customer – I don’t need you, you need me!

Once we understand that, we can focus on the problem and not on our personal reaction to their expressed need. Stay objective and problem solve. Reflect their anger and state something like: Yes, Mr. Customer, I can see that you are right about that. We will remedy it for you ASAP. How’s that?

If we are uncomfortable with conflict, we will get defensive. Rather, it is best to see conflict as an opportunity to confront the issue with the client and help direct

his/her hostility toward resolution of the problem. Say something like: “How can we remedy this for you?”

Understanding your personal preferences along with the expressed behaviours of others whether a customer or an in-house client, helps to objectify any interpersonal relations patterns. If we can maintain objectivity, we can maintain our focus on the problem and not on the person.



The Social Side – Strategy #2 TAKING ACTION AND MAKING POSITIVE CONNECTIONS WITH THE CUSTOMER

The hallmark of a good service person comes from the most important people skill – showing empathy and striving to be on the same side. For this to be expressed, we have to have a clear understanding of people differences and how to constructively respond to those differences. Develop your own scripts on how to respond to the various expressed needs that customers vocalize. Keep focusing on the problem – not the person. When problems are addressed, you and your customer turn the focus on getting results. This creates trust because you are respecting the differences in points of view. Communication is two-way and is relevant, focused, and to the point but problem-centered not person-centered. Your relationship with the customer becomes synergistic as you strive to increase innovative ways for dealing with difficult systems.

Besides performing our technical jobs, our job is also to solve our customer’s problem by identifying the gap between what they have and what they want.

We can do this by:

1. Obtaining information on our customer's present situation.
2. Gathering information on what the customer's desired situation would be.

Should we run into needs-based responses other than those responses about the feature or service, remember to talk problem not people or person. Following is an example of a script to assist you in dealing with angry customers:

BEHAVIOUR: Irrational, aggressive, frustrated.

YOUR RESPONSE:

- Re-state understanding of problem (diffuse).
- Show empathy.
- Offer solutions (options).
- Leave once resolution or agreement is reached.



The Physical Side – Strategy #3 CREATING BOUNDARIES FOR QUALITY CUSTOMER SERVICE

Understanding boundaries and what to let in and what to filter out is important in any area of our lives. We don't have to accept another person's anger – that's their problem not ours. We do, however, have to take their problems seriously, making every attempt to resolve their issues by removing barriers if we can.

If the client gets so hostile that it hinges on violence, you don't have to take that kind of abuse. Confront their hostility by acknowledging it, clarify that you want to solve their problem if you can but that it is difficult to do so when you feel intimidated.

BEHAVIOUR: hostile, violent.

YOUR RESPONSE:

- Re-state understanding of problem (diffuse).
- Acknowledge hostility.
- Clarify you want to solve their problem.
- Reflect how difficult it is to focus when feeling intimidated.
- Refocus on the problem and remain business-like.

By learning to be more assertive and addressing problems from an objective point of view, you learn to trust your assertiveness skills. You then take more risks, gaining in confidence in your abilities to deal with conflict. In doing this, you improve results and outcomes while improving on enthusiasm, morale, follow through, and developing an increased commitment to the job.

Boundaries help us to uphold our personal rights and ensure that our behaviour is respectful of the rights of self and others. When our boundaries work, they uphold what we value and protect us from being violated. Boundaries falter for personal reasons which are based on our own needs, whether learned or preferred. For example, if you are the type of person who feels guilty, you will have a difficult time saying no. If, when tired and under stress, you react without thinking, you can say things that you may later regret. Sometimes, it feels more comfortable to just walk away from a difficult customer because you do not like to feel threatened.

We all have challenges when it comes to confrontation and conflict. However if we learn to see conflict as just another expression of energy, an expression of a need which is usually a Ego-Power based expression, then we realize that we don't have to accept another person's anger. We don't have to take that

expressed need personally but we do have to redirect their anger towards a resolution of the problem. Focus on the problem – not on the person.

FOR RELEASING INNER HOSTILITY WITHIN YOURSELF WHICH HAS BEEN TRIGGERED BY THE CUSTOMER'S UNCHECKED IRATE ANGER:

1. MAINTAIN YOUR COOL.
2. DO NOT ACCEPT HIS GIFT OF ANGER AS IT DOESN'T BELONG TO YOU – IT IS REALLY ABOUT HIM OR HER.
3. AFTER HE OR SHE LEAVES, DO THE FOLLOWING:
 - a. When you get off the phone or away from an irate customer, take out a piece of paper and with a pencil or pen, write down everything you would really like to say to that person if you could.
 - b. Don't censor your thoughts – discharge them on the paper. You dirty son-of-a-ditch, you rotten bustard, you The way you treated me -- no one should have to take that kind of abuse and I feel like punching you in the nose, you \$\$\$#@!!!!
 - c. Toss the paper in the garbage because that's where it belongs – out of your system and tossed – it does not belong to you.



SUMMARY

When we are operating in an objective way, we are saying that the job, the individual, and our own needs for growth and accomplishments are all equally important and should not be sacrificed or compromised.

When you are staying objective and focusing on the problem, you are asking the customer for what they need, addressing their problems in objective ways, being as specific as you can around issues, not generalizing, not controlling, but supporting, confronting, and achieving business objectives while strengthening and building strong customer relations.

Personal insights and the learning strategies are designed to provide you with a problem-solving approach for managing customers' expectations and needs. The bottom line with customer relations is to act as a problem solver-- using your mental, social, and physical sides to find out the customer's needs and fulfill those needs. *Take nothing personally but take the customer's needs seriously.*

