Customer Service with a Smile: Creating a Climate Where Customers Come First

Tina A. Coffelt

Regional Grocers Use Customer Communication as a Competitive Advantage

Nestled in the small, manufacturing and university town of Maryville, MO, resides a great example of customer service—Fred Mares. Fred is a greeter at the local Hy-Vee store, which has survived the infringing competition from Wal-Mart when other local and regional grocers could not. There are several reasons Hy-Vee has survived and even expanded its Maryville food center, one of which is Fred Mares. Fred is no ordinary grocery store greeter. Fred excels at extending a warm, genuine greeting to every customer who enters the store. He remembers people's names and important events in their lives. I left this town over seven years ago, yet he frequently asks my mother how I'm doing. He reads the local newspaper and remembers information. He remembers where I live and my profession. When I am in town, Fred immediately recognizes me and calls me by name. My story is not unique. Countless local citizens make this same claim. What else does Fred do that makes him extraordinary? His presence is felt throughout the store. He offers hugs, sings songs, and gives flowers. When one customer made her first visit to Hy-Vee after the passing of her husband, Fred sang "One Day at a Time, Sweet Jesus" to her in the store! Years later, when this woman passed away, her granddaughter ventured into the store. Fred sang the same song to the granddaughter and gave her a red rose. The store director in 2010, Ben Conway, said, "In all my years with Hy-Vee, I have never worked with an employee who has a true passion and sincerity for customer service like he does. Fred makes a difference in people's lives every day." In 2010, Fred was recognized for his outstanding service when he received one of nine Hy-Vee Legendary Customer Service awards.

Could outstanding customer service be the competitive advantage that keeps local and regional grocers afloat in the midst of price-cutting Wal-Mart? What are the exemplary communication practices that help an employee achieve such legendary status and transcend average customer service? The focus of this chapter is to highlight the communication skills necessary to meet and exceed customer expectations. The chapter begins by introducing key definitions and concepts, then proceeds to suggesting how to get customer service right the first time. Comments on listening and nonverbal communication skills will be offered, followed by a discussion of challenging customers and service recovery. The chapter closes by mentioning the emerging trends of customer call centers, globalization, and technology.

Key Definitions and Concepts

Customer service is (1) usually provided by all industries and is the service provided in support of an organization's core products (Gronfeldt and Strother 2006); (2) the ability of knowledgeable, capable, and enthusiastic employees to deliver products and services to their internal and external customers in a manner that satisfies identified and unidentified needs and ultimately results in positive word-of-mouth publicity and return business (Lucas 2005). Servicing customers involves many different functions. For example, products and services need to be designed to meet customers' needs; logistics need to be coordinated to deliver products on time or before; managers need to hire, train, and reward employees to value customer service and to communicate with them in appropriate and effective ways; and price points need to coincide with perceived value. These different functions operate in tandem and are integral to the overall customer experience. One specific element of customer service is customer communication, which is the focus of this chapter.

CUSTOMER COMMUNICATION

Customer communication focuses on the points of intersection between the customer and the service provider.

These interactions are often face-to-face. However, organizations' shift toward the use of technology means that customers interact with mediated channels such as online support systems or smartphone applications with increasing frequency. Advantages and disadvantages of the use of technology will be addressed in a later section. The majority of this

chapter will focus on face-to-face interactions because of their importance and complexity even though many of the same principles apply to mediated forms of communication. The aspects of customer communication introduced in this chapter include strategies to deliver positive customer experiences, listening, nonverbal communication, service recovery, technology, call centers, and culture. A few key concepts follow, specifically customer relationships, customer and industry types, and naming customers.

Customer Relationships

The term *customer* encompasses a broad range of relationships and levels of interdependence between organizations and those they serve. A client represents a repeat customer who has considerable interdependence with the organization and/or service provider. The client relationship alters the communication needed because the interactions will be frequent and involve considerable depth. A lawyer, for example, talks to a client on several occasions, discusses sensitive information, and the client relies heavily on the expertise and actions of the lawyer. Or, take ACME Industries, for example, a small contract manufacturer with only 10 customers ("Rustbelt Recovery" 2011). Ten customers who buy large industrial equipment are likely to be highly interdependent and operate more like business partners than a service provider–customer relationship. By contrast, a salesperson for Nordstrom may have one interaction with a customer or multiple interactions with repeat customers. The topic of clothing and accessories does not preclude a high level of disclosing personal information. The client relies on the salesperson for assistance, but can find similar services from many other clothing providers. Consider also the Wal-Mart associate who completes a transaction for hundreds of customers who have very little dependence on the associate. The length of the transaction is quick and the quality of the interaction is impersonal.

Another way to think about the types of interactions between customers and service providers is to review the distinctions made by Gutek et al. (2000). These scholars described the interface between customers and service providers as service encounters, service relationships, or pseudo-relationships. Service encounters are brief and occur only once with no expectation for repeat interaction with the same person. Examples of service encounters include a ticket teller at a sports or concert venue or associates who work for airlines. Service relationships are more involved with expectations of seeing the same service provider on future interactions. These could include a hairdresser or doctor. Pseudorelationships are characterized by repeat interactions with the same organization but the customer

could interact with various service providers. Customers of large organizations such as AT&T, Target, or Burger King are examples of organizations who would engage in pseudorelationships. This chapter is geared toward the communication in service encounters, although many principles apply to service or pseudorelationships. While some of the same communication principles apply, the interdependence and frequent, repeat interaction will require additional communication skill sets that exceed the intent of this chapter.

Customer and Industry Types

Communication with customers also varies by the type of customer and by the type of industry (Yim, Tse, and Chan 2008). Customer and industry type must be given consideration when developing service strategies and communication norms because customers have different expectations for different types of service providers. For example, customers have higher expectations of professional service providers such as physicians, mechanics, and hairdressers (Ford 2003). The importance of customer type can be seen by contrasting Wal-Mart with Nordstrom's. Wal-Mart serves all cross-sections of the population and must therefore be prepared to communicate in general, broad ways. Their service encounters are brief and impersonal, as well, so the investment of the service provider in the customer is very low. Customers expect courteous service and someone to be available when help is needed. However, they rarely expect in-depth explanations of products or an overview of different product offerings available. Nordstrom, by contrast, deals with a specific target market— the high-end section of the population. Further, the product offerings are confined to clothing and accessories. The clientele possess and expect a level of sophistication in their transactions with service providers. Most Nordstrom's clients want personalized attention and expect to have an associate remember their name and clothing preferences. Nordstrom's sales staff are more interdependent with their customers than Wal-Mart associates. Berry (1995) refers to this distinction as relational services or transactional services. Yim et al. (2008) found that relational services are characterized by more affection and are more commitment driven than transactional services.

The industry also impacts the communication norms. For example, funeral home directors, hospitals, adoption agencies, or youth camps require social support, sympathy or empathy, and compassion when interacting with their customers. Dell, AT&T, or DirecTV need to be resourceful and knowledgeable when talking with customers. And, bill collectors must be firm and direct when interacting with their customers. When review-

ing the information in this chapter, the reader must consider the ideas in relation to a specific industry and customer type.

Naming the Customer

Naming the customer can have meaningful consequences for customers. It is well known that Walt Disney World, Ritz Carlton, and many organizations in the hospitality industry refer to their customers as guests. This change in language shifts the mentality of the service provider to think of the customer as a guest in one's home, someone who is extended the best hospitality possible, who is catered to and cared about. Guests also sense a greater connection to the organization by seeing themselves as "more than" a customer, but rather a visitor who has come to a special place. Other examples include patients in the medical profession or patrons at libraries. Regardless of the label used, customers have expectations about how they will be served. These expectations are met or exceeded by organizations who understand the importance of providing excellent customer service.

THE AMERICAN CUSTOMER SATISFACTION INDEX

The American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) gathers and analyzes data from over 225 companies and 47 industries in the United States. View their reports at www.theacsi.org.

Importance of Customer Service

Customer service is important for at least three reasons. First, the universal principle of the Golden Rule warrants treating others with respect and civility. The golden rule—do unto others as you would have done to you—exists in many cultures around the world and has permeated cultures throughout much of civilization. Plato, Socrates, Native Americans, Taoism, the Bible, and the Qur'an, among many other sources, have quoted some version of the golden rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." This apparent universal principle serves as an undercurrent for the treatment of customers. In general, when customers are treated with respect, have important information, and are cared about, they will be satisfied with their service encounter, make referrals, and/or repurchase products or services.

Second, repeat business and customer loyalty are more likely with outstanding customer service. Satisfied customers are, in general, more likely

to return to the organization for future purchases (e.g., Helgesen 2006). Organizations experience higher profitability from these repeat customers by keeping marketing costs low.

Third, the financial benefits of superb customer service are well documented. As customer satisfaction scores increase, so, too, do stock prices (Fornell et al. 2006) and shareholder value (Anderson, Fornell, and Mazvancheryl 2004). In fact, investors who select firms with high and increasing customer satisfaction scores are likely to experience stronger returns than investing in the S&P 500 index (Aksoy et al. 2008). Companies such as Publix, USAA, Lexus, or Ritz-Carlton remain in business and maintain strong financial performance because of their commitment to customer satisfaction.

The reasons to emphasize customer service introduced in this section underscore the attention needed to be given to all facets of the customer experience. With this chapter's focus on communication, we now turn to a discussion of best practices to deliver outstanding communication with customers.

Getting It Right the First Time

A global survey conducted by consulting firm Accenture confirmed that superior customer service is characterized by the quality and competence of service personnel (Sprague 2009). How-tos for customer service are well documented in a multitude of sources, including generic training books and manuals, textbooks, organizational case studies, and company specific materials. However, this content is fitting for the current chapter for a review and comprehensive understanding of customer communication. When customers are communicated with in a respectful, cordial manner from the beginning of the interaction to the end, many problems can be alleviated and customers will have a positive experience. This section addresses several aspects of communication that boost service providers from average to exceptional by following an interaction from greetings to the transaction, then shifting to discuss (1) specific words and phrases to use, (2) words and phrases to avoid, and (3) stylistic ways to deliver messages.

Greetings

The greeting is the first point of contact between the customer and service provider, and it sets the tone for the rest of the interaction. Therefore, it is important that every customer be extended a greeting as soon as

possible. The greeting should be friendly, prompt, and sincere and guide the customer to the next step in using the organization's services. The words used could include hello, welcome, or some other company specific wording. Follow this greeting with a lead such as, "How can I help you today?" or "What can we do for you?" Here, the customer is invited to share with the service provider and convey his/her needs.

Service providers face a dilemma when they are serving one customer and another one approaches. In these situations, service providers should excuse themselves from the current customer, acknowledge the new customer, and return to the original customer. When additional service providers are available, initiative should be demonstrated by the service provider with two customers by asking for assistance. When customers call on the telephone while the service provider is with a customer, the service provider has the option to let the call go to voicemail or take the call. Managers should evaluate their respective client base and discuss expectations so service providers will know how to juggle this situation.

Using customers' names can be powerful, as well. Carnegie (1936) said, "Remember that a person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language" (83). It is the service provider's responsibility to take the initiative and ask for the customer's name when the industry warrants this personal touch. A cashier at Walgreen's would not be expected to ask for a customer's name but a mechanic or hairstylist would have this expectation. Repeat customers at any type of organization appreciate being known by name. So, if the Walgreen's cashier notices the same shopper every Wednesday morning, the shopper would likely appreciate being known by name. When service providers forget customers' names, an easy phrase to get the information again is, "Tell me your name again." This phrase requests the information and acknowledges that you have received it previously. People are usually flattered to be called by name and by efforts to remember the name. The greeting gradually progresses to the actual transaction where the service is provided.

The Transaction

After the greeting has been extended to the customer, the transaction will proceed.

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HARRAH'S CASINOS

Harrah's Casinos evaluates service providers in three phases of guest interaction: welcome, build relationships, and bring them back.

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Customers should be asked what they need and the service provider then proceeds to meet that need. As the transaction evolves, there are at least eight basic principles to follow:

1. Remain focused on the positive. Statements to customers should be about what the organization can do and how the customers' needs will be met.
2. Be specific by using the 5W1H approach. Use questions beginning with who, what, when, where, why, or how as appropriate to get information from the customer that the provider needs to complete the transaction. There are times when customers have a need, but they aren't aware of the steps involved or the choices they have to get their needs met.

> ### ASKING QUESTIONS
>
> When I purchased a dishwasher from Lowe's recently, my need was to get one that worked. The service provider asked me questions about the color options, plumbing connections, installation services, and dishwasher disposal, four aspects I had not thought about before setting out to replace my old dishwasher. These questions helped me see there was more involved with the purchase. As a result, I was a satisfied customer when I had a color that matched my other appliances, the right connector hoses, an installer set up through Lowe's, and the disposal of my old dishwasher.

3. Paraphrase back to the customer to confirm that the request has been understood. Restating an order at a restaurant or drive-through window is one way to confirm that orders are correct.
4. Use positively phrased questions. Lucas (2005) provides these examples of positively phrased questions (Table 4.1).
5. Ask the customer's permission before you make any change in the conversation. For example, ask a customer if you can place him/her on hold. Some customers might not have the time to hold and elect to call back.
6. Find opportunities to state "I agree" when interacting with customers. This simple phrase lets customers know their ideas are valid. For example, a customer who is decorating a living room may need to hear "I agree that you want to have three objects in a grouping."
7. Ask questions to get feedback. Ask customers if an item you found meets their needs.
8. Close the transaction professionally. Thank customers for their business, let them know you are glad they chose you, and invite them to return again or to refer you to others.

Table 4.1   Positively Phrased Questions

Instead of	Try
Why do you feel that way?	What makes you feel that way?
Why don't you like . . .?	What is it that you don't like about . . .?
Why do you need that feature?	How is that feature going to be beneficial to you?
Why do you want that color?	What other colors have you considered?
Don't you think . . .?	What do you think . . .?
Aren't you going to make a deposit?	What amount would you like to deposit?

The eight items in this list provide an overview of what to say during an interaction with a customer. Additional details of what to say follow.

What to Say

The messages delivered by service providers can follow a script or flow freely and spontaneously. This section discusses the advantages and disadvantages of using scripts, then addresses other aspects of what to say during a service encounter. Specifically, you-centered language is introduced and how to translate company jargon is mentioned.

Many organizations will prepare scripts for service providers to use, which are both beneficial and detrimental to customer communication. Advantages of using scripts include consistency and quality control. Consider the customer call center with dozens of customer service representatives (CSRs) fielding hundreds of calls in a day. The sheer volume of calls increases the probability for service issues. Further, most of these calls are made by dissatisfied customers to begin with. When organizations prepare scripts for these CSRs, they have a unified way of training CSRs to respond to customers and present a consistent, uniform approach to responding to customers' concerns. The disadvantage of scripts is the lack of spontaneity noted in the voices of the CSRs. Many of them are focused on getting the words right and following a protocol, which consequently miss the connection with the customer. The Starbucks approach to service deviates from scripted communication by using the "Five Ways of Being": be welcoming, be genuine, be considerate, be knowledgeable, and be involved. Employees are encouraged to communicate in ways that reflect the "Five Ways

of Being" that suit each employee's personality and unique communication style.

Whether an organization chooses to use a script or not, you-centered language can enhance interactions with customers. You-centered communication shows listeners that their needs and wants are being attended to. It is achieved by literally using "you" language in phrases such as, "You can find that brand in aisle 8." You-centered language is one way to show customers that service providers are interested and concerned about their well-being and experience. Phrasing sentences with you-centered language is simple, subtle, and powerful. Notice the comparison between these phrases in Table 4.2.

You-centered language should be reflected throughout the entire service transaction. In addition, words that customers understand will be important because company jargon can create barriers between the customer and the service provider.

Organizations develop their own unique language or vocabulary referred to as jargon. These words or phrases help internal members of the organization conduct work in meaningful ways that reflect the mission and unity of the organization. However, these words and phrases do little to help the customer. Service providers have one of two options. First, change the language used. Speak in terms that customers understand, even if organizational members use different terms. Second, use the jargon and then explain this terminology to the customer. This option would be helpful if you anticipate the customer will have future correspondence regarding the same product or service. For example, if an attorney suggests a retainer, but the client has never worked with an attorney before, this word could be unfamiliar and require explanation. Or, first-time home buyers are inundated with new processes and procedures that have their own set of terms that realtors are quite familiar with. A conscientious real-

Table 4.2   You-Centered Language

Typical Messages	You-Centered Language
I'll get that right out to you.	Your order will be ready in five minutes.
I can show you these alternate styles.	You might like these alternate styles.
When I'm finished with this customer, I'll be right with you.	You are the next customer to be served.

tor will spend time explaining the process and corresponding terms with a first-time home buyer.

In brief, getting it right the first time means extending a greeting, attending to the transaction, and using you-centered language with terms customers understand. There are also phrases and words that should be avoided during customer interactions.

What Not to Say

What not to say can be categorized in three ways: (1) avoid negative information, (2) avoid small, yet powerful words, and (3) eliminate customer pet peeves. Customers rarely like to hear negative information and there are certain phrases to avoid to minimize the negativity. First, customers don't want to hear what the service provider can't do. Responding to a customer's request by saying "I can't do that" even if the intention is to be helpful irritates most customers. Customers aren't interested in what can't be done. They are seeking results. Instead, focus on what can be done. For example, the service provider could say "Manager X can help you with that. If you'll wait here for just a moment, she/he will be with you."

Second, avoid global terms such as always, everyone, or no one. These words, found to be used by pessimists (Seligman 1998), sound absolute or inaccurate, which create doubt in the minds of customers. Is it really true that "everyone" follows the incorrect procedures?

Third, patronizing speech should be avoided. Patronizing speech is characterized as slow, oversimplified, polite, and overly warm (Nussbaum et al. 1996). This form of speech has also been called baby talk because of the high pitch and rising intonation at the end of a statement. The elderly are often spoken to in this way by nursing home or assisted care service providers and the elderly report low levels of satisfaction and disrespect (Giles, Fox, and Smith 1993; Ryan, Hamilton, and See 1994) when talked to in this manner. Other customers, too, are likely to feel belittled and talked down to when service providers use patronizing speech.

Fourth, avoid verbal finger pointing. When a service failure has occurred, customers do not want to hear who made the mistake. The customer sees the entire organization and pointing fingers at other people/departments diminishes the credibility of the organization and shows a lack of communication within the company. While the individual service provider may be trying to save face, the whole organization suffers. Organizations should devote time to understand where and why service failures occur, but this information is usually not appropriate to share with the customer.

While negative phrases should be avoided, there are also some words that are short, yet emotionally charged. This section discusses four of these small but powerful words and pointers on how to use them in the customer communication context: should, but, they, and why.

Should. Avoid telling customers what they *should* have done. When a product or service failure has occurred, the customer knows about the failure and does not want to be told how he or she made the failure occur. What has happened is in the past and customer satisfaction does not benefit from telling customers what they should have done. There are ways to correct operator error without "shoulding" the customer. For example, the service provider could say, "The next time you use the product, try following this procedure."

But. Yes, *but* statements are designed with the best of intentions, but the *but* negates the original statement. Telling a customer, "that outfit looks fantastic on you, but you need a different pair of shoes" tells the customer that the outfit does not look great after all. Therefore, substitute the word *and* for *but.* Tell the customer, "That outfit looks fantastic on you, and these shoes would go great with it!" This simple change in wording also creates opportunities for upselling!

They. Who is *they?* This word is used a lot in everyday language and has carried over into business communication. Be specific with customers to show competence and convey confidence. When service providers say "they added on another surcharge" to explain an item on a bill, the vague "they" leaves the customer uncertain about the service provider and the organization. Rephrase this statement by saying, "The airline added another surcharge."

Why. Another small but powerful word is *why,* spoken as the accusatory question. Asking why a customer is interested in a particular product or feature is helpful. Asking a customer why he didn't use primer when painting a wall sounds accusatory and puts the customer on the defensive. These simple changes in wording can have a positive impact on the perceptions of customers' experiences with service providers.

While avoiding negativity and small, powerful words, service providers should also strive to avoid customer pet peeves. Customers don't like excessive wait times, service providers who have an unprofessional appearance or are chewing gum or tobacco products. The attitude of the service provider is important, as well. Customers have a disdain for service providers who seem disinterested in serving altogether and those who are blatantly rude. Customers also want to have the phone answered in less than four rings and they get annoyed when they are abruptly placed on hold. Service providers who do not have the requisite knowledge or authority to serve the customer are also annoying to customers. Finally,

overfamiliarity can be a pet peeve. The server who calls her customers "honey" or "sweetie" may seem to be friendly and cordial, but many customers find this too personal and invasive.

Thus far, getting the service encounter right the first time has focused on the greeting, the transaction, what to say, and what not to say. The last component of the transaction includes stylistic characteristics of how to deliver messages.

How to Say It

How to deliver messages to customers can be summarized by discussing sociality communication and communication climate, turning first to sociality communication.

Communication researchers have analyzed sociality communication, defined as "performance that encourages a cooperative, social smoothness, void of intense interactions with others" (Pancanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo 1983, 139–40) as a means to interact with customers. Implementing sociality requires emphasis on four types of messages: courtesies, pleasantries, sociabilities, and privacies. Courtesies include greetings and thank yous and are characterized by warmth and friendliness. Pleasantries are synonymous with small talk. Sociabilities extend beyond small talk into joking, gossiping, or complaining. Privacies include sharing personal information as well as demonstrating support, consolation, or confession. Analysis of these four categories of service communication reduced them to two overarching types of service called personal connection (pleasantries, sociabilities, and privacies) and courteous expressions (Koermer, Ford, and Brant 2000). Personal connection and courteous expressions are both associated with customer satisfaction across different types of service industries, although courteous expressions were more important to predicting customer satisfaction with professional service providers (i.e., doctor and hairstylist-barber; Koermer 2005). Further analysis of physicians confirms that courteous expressions contribute to satisfaction more than personal connections (Koermer and Kilbane 2008). Courteous expressions and personal connection have also been found to be associated with customer loyalty (Koermer and McCroskey 2006). These studies indicate that being courteous is very important to ensuring customer satisfaction and loyalty. Making personal connections is associated with satisfaction and loyalty, and does not appear to be evaluated as heavily by customers.

Communication climate is the second concept that can be used to describe how to deliver messages to customers. Communication climates

were described by Gibb (1961) as either supportive or defensive. Getting along with others in organizational settings can be achieved quite well in a supportive communication climate. Gibb (1961) observed employees in several national organizations and observed general tendencies among people to create a work environment that was either supportive or defensive. In a supportive communication climate, individuals are valued, cherished, and respected. Supportive climates are important for many contexts, including customer service. By contrast, a defensive communication environment is marked by individuals who feel rejected, disrespected, and invalidated. To describe these tendencies, Gibb contrasted sets of communication behaviors to show how supportive communicators convey their messages when compared to those who speak defensively. Table 4.3 shows six sets of these characteristics with the supportive qualities on the left and the defensive qualities on the right. Characteristics are understood best when compared with the quality in the same row. For example, descriptive language is understood best when compared to evaluative language.

Supportive communicators use descriptive language and make genuine requests for information. They are willing to experiment, investigate issues and solve problems. Their comments are honest and spontaneous without complication. Collaboration, gaining input, and extending reassurances and understanding are also invoked by supportive communicators. Those who are supportive also attach little significance to differences in status, talent, or ability.

Defensive communicators speak in an accusatory tone and blame others when bad things happen. They are often arrogant and stubborn, act like know-it-alls, and have to win arguments. Their motivations for communication are deceptive or ambiguous. Control is evident in defensive communicators as they assume inadequacy among those they are talking to. They might also suggest highly restrictive policies and pay too much attention to detail. Emotionally, they seem detached and clinical in their interactions. Defensive communicators will also one-up the person they are speaking with and believe they don't need help.

These qualities of supportive and defensive communication climates are not all inclusive. People are likely to exhibit some attributes of all these descriptors at one point or another. The best way to use these descriptions is to focus on the supportive communication characteristics and apply them to interactions with customers.

This section emphasized the qualities of service interactions that are important for consistent, high-quality customer service. In addition to the verbal messages that service providers offer, they also need to attend to their listening and nonverbal communication skills.

Table 4.3   Comparing Supportive and Defensive Communication Climates

Supportive	Defensive
Descriptive	*Evaluation*
Genuine requests for information	Accusatory tone, blame
I language, you seem	Place others in categories
	Too, very, you should
Provisionalism/flexible	*Certainty/rigid*
Willing to experiment	Arrogant, stubborn
Investigates issues	Know-it-all
Solves problems	Has to win an argument
	Low tolerance for opposite opinion
Spontaneity/genuine	*Strategy/manipulation*
Straightforward, honest	Ambiguous motivations
React spontaneously to situations	Withhold information
Uncomplicated motives	Deceptive
Problem orientation	*Control*
Collaborate, get input	Try to change with hidden motives
What do you think about . . .?	Assumes target is inadequate
	Too much attention to detail
	Restrictive policies
Empathy	*Neutrality/detached*
Convey worth of listener	Detached, clinical
Reassuring, understanding	Lack of concern
	"Don't feel bad"
Equality	*Superiority*
Attaches little importance to differences in talent, ability, status, etc.	One upper
	Won't jointly solve a problem
	Resistant to feedback
	Doesn't need help

Listening Skills

Listening skills are also vital to customer communication. These skills are essential to ensuring accuracy and achieving shared meaning between the customer and service provider. Listening was one of four deficient communication skills rated serious and frequent in a study of auditors by their

clients (Golen, Catanach, and Moeckel 1997). The first step in discussing listening is to distinguish between hearing and listening. Hearing is the physical ability to receive sounds. Here, service providers need to ensure that distracting noises are reduced as much as possible. It is the service providers' responsibility to turn down music, close doors, or quiet other patrons to adequately serve customers. By contrast, listening is the cognitive process of interpreting information received and trying to understand the needs and wants of the customer. After securing the physical ability to hear, service providers need to attend to their customers by making and maintaining eye contact and using facial gestures that convey genuine interest. Then, the customer needs to process the information received and respond to the customer accordingly.

One of the challenges with listening is that people speak on average 125–150 words per minute but the brain can process 4–6 times that amount of information. It is easy to get distracted or prepare a response while the customer is still talking. Therefore, a good listener will be focused, responsive, alert, understanding, caring, empathetic, interested, patient, cautious, and open.

Good listeners also work to minimize barriers to effective listening. These barriers are either internal or external. Internal barriers include personal biases, psychological issues going on with the service provider, physical issues such as sickness, circadian rhythm, preoccupation, or hearing loss. External barriers include information overload, other people talking, ringing tones, speakerphones, or equipment.

To improve listening, service providers can stop talking, prepare, listen for concepts, be patient and open, take notes, and ask questions. Further, they can strive to engage in active listening or mindful listening.

Active listening is "an attempt to demonstrate unconditional acceptance and unbiased reflection. Active listening requires that the listener try to understand the speaker's own understanding of an experience without the listener's own interpretive structures intruding on his or her understanding of the other person" (Weger, Castle, and Emmett 2010, 35). Service providers can use active listening to convey to customers that they are being listened to carefully. To demonstrate active listening, service providers can smile, minimize interruptions, use good posture, lean toward the customer, paraphrase, nod, and use affirming language.

Mindful listening is "the ability to receive the spoken word accurately, retain information, sustain attention, attend to your own responsive speech, and encourage the speaker" (Shafir 2009, 219). This skill is important for service providers, particularly those who hear repeated questions over and over again. It is understandable that a service provider would become complacent with customers after hearing the same questions or concerns

repeatedly. Customers will need to be trained well and receive frequent reminders that each customer is a person with individual wants and needs. While products or services are second nature to organizational members, the client may be experiencing the product or service for the first time and needs reassurance, validation, or information. Thus, maintaining an attitude of service and desire to help others are crucial skills for service providers in these types of service roles. For example, employees at colleges and universities who work in student support areas such as admissions, transfer centers, financial assistance, or cashiering hear repeated inquiries from thousands of students and their parents. These staff members should strive for mindfulness and awareness that each student comes from a different background and is unfamiliar with university processes and jargon.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication messages arguably comprise the majority of a receiver's understanding of a given message (Birdwhistell 1970; Mehrabian 1972). For example, Starbuck's manager Lisa Lenahan commented on the importance of observing nonverbal communication when she said, "There's an art to knowing if your customers are displeased. You can read their body language, and you should be able to take care of concerns before you are even asked. If [customers] are tapping their foot or crossing their arms, you should already know that something is not quite right" (Michelli 2006, 145). This section reviews the major categories of nonverbal communication behaviors and provides suggestions for how to display these cues when interacting with customers: proxemics, kinesics, oculesics, facial expressions, chronemics, vocalics, haptics, and physical appearance.

Proxemics

Proxemics are nonverbal communication behaviors that refer to the physical distance between those who are communicating. Hall (1959) described four zones of interpersonal distance that are generally maintained by people in the United States. These zones include the intimate zone (3 to 6 inches), the personal zone (8 to 20 inches), the social/work zone (20 inches to 5 feet), and the public zone (5½ to 8 feet). Service providers should be aware of these social norms and strive for the personal or social zone, whichever is most appropriate for the industry and physical space where the interaction occurs. Standing too close to a customer while checking out new electronic devices at the local Best Buy will likely make the customer feel uncomfortable and perhaps leave the store.

Kinesics

Kinesics are those nonverbal gestures that involve body motion. These include posture, head nodding, gestures, and the handshake, among others. Movements service providers should avoid include fidgeting, crossing arms, and holding hands near the mouth (this gesture leads to distrust). The ways in which kinesic movements are performed is important for above-average customer communication. For example, the posture should be straight with a forward lean toward the customer. The head should nod in agreement when the service provider is in agreement or to signify acknowledgment of information. Gestures should be open and inviting. For example, a service provider could span his/her arms when a customer enters the organization. A handshake is important in particular situations. When you work in an industry where you shake hands with the customer, make sure the handshake is initiated by the service provider and firm.

Oculesics

Oculesics is another term for eye contact. Eye contact is a powerful way to connect with a customer. Generally, maintain eye contact for 5–10 seconds, then glance a way. Any more eye contact is perceived as staring, which makes others uncomfortable. Any less eye contact is perceived as lack of caring or distrust.

Facial Expressions

Facial expressions include movement of the eyebrows, eyelids, nose, and mouth. These parts of the face move in conjunction with each other to send messages, many of which are emotions (Eckman 2003). Further, these facial expressions that convey emotion are argued to be innate and universal (Eckman 2003). Therefore, service providers need to be aware of their emotions and do their best to be genuine. Counterfeit emotions attempted during a service interaction could be noted by the customer and the insincerity diminishes the attempt at positive customer communication.

The smile is a specific facial expression that has tremendous impact with customer communication. Smiling is perceived as welcoming, courteous, friendly, and helpful (Muir 2008). Customers will appreciate the service provided by those who genuinely smile. In fact, smiling is so powerful that service providers on the telephone are encouraged to smile while talking. Even though the customer cannot see the service provider, the positive changes to the voice that accompany a smile can be detected by the customer.

Chronemics

Chronemics encompass all aspects of the use of time. While wait times and throughput time are key indicators of performance for responses to customers, the aspect most closely related to communication includes how wait times are expressed to customers. For example, the restaurant industry frequently tells customers that the wait is longer than anticipated. Then, when the wait time is shorter than they were told, they are pleasantly surprised and have a positive reaction. However, when the doctor's office tells patients there is a 20-minute wait and the actual wait time is 1 hour, patients become agitated. Realistic wait times are important to communicate for positive customer reactions.

> **COMPARISONS OF ACCEPTABLE WAIT TIMES IN A PHYSICIAN'S OFFICE**
>
> A survey of physicians and patients found that 86 percent of patients believed the maximum wait time should be 30 minutes. By contrast, 27 percent of physicians believed the maximum wait time should be 30 minutes whereas 18 percent believed it should be 45 minutes and 54 percent believed the maximum wait time should be 60 minutes (as cited in Ford and Snyder 2000).

Vocalics

Vocalics or vocal cues include any aspect of sound delivered from the mouth without forming words. Several vocal cues impact customer communication. First, the tone of voice needs to be positive, upbeat, sincere, and friendly. Second, the tone needs to convey strength and confidence. Third, the volume should be loud enough so the customers can hear, but not so loud so as to draw unnecessary attention to the customer. Fourth, the rate of speech should also be set to meet customers' expectations. Fast speakers, especially when their voices are amplified through microphones, can be difficult to understand. Fifth, vocal quality can be important, as well. Matching service providers' voices to the industry and customer type will be valuable. A forceful voice at a spa would not be well received, but a soothing, calm voice would do little to build the confidence of a customer at a hardware store! Sixth, articulation is another vocal cue to consider. People who mumble or do not open their mouths articulate poorly and are difficult to understand. In brief, these vocal elements seem to be simple yet how many of the readers can recall an interaction with a service provider when one or more of these vocal elements diminished your ability

to understand a service provider? Managers have a responsibility to train, coach, and correct these aspects of the voice to ensure customers can understand the messages given by service providers.

Haptics

Haptics refers to touch. Touch used by service providers can be helpful when used appropriately. The doctor who gives a reassuring pat on a patient's arm shows genuine concern. The funeral home director who puts her arm around grieving family members shows comfort and compassion. However, the cashier at a mall store who touches the hand of a customer when giving a receipt would be violating the customer's expectation, or the appliance salesman who puts his arm around a customer could likely be headed for a sexual harassment lawsuit! Some people are very comfortable with touch and have positive intentions. However, their expressions, when used with strangers, can make customers uncomfortable. Therefore, this aspect of nonverbal communication warrants a specific discussion with service providers about the expectations of the industry and customers.

Physical Appearance

Appearance is another aspect of nonverbal communication that is highly context specific as well as controversial. Whether organizations use uniforms or have a dress code, the overriding elements expected by customers include neat and clean grooming, attention to personal hygiene, and appropriate hairstyles, make-up, jewelry, body piercings, tattoos, or facial hair. Industry and safety standards vary for each of these characteristics of appearance. Have clear expectations for service providers. Make them aware of the appropriate standards for appearance and why these standards are important for customer service.

Despite the efforts of managers to train service providers to get it right the first time by emphasizing what to say, what not to say, how to say it, listening, and using nonverbal communication skills, there are some customers who create challenges for the best-trained service providers. The next section introduces difficult customers, followed by a section on service recovery.

Difficult Customers

Not all customers are alike, and this variety can create challenging situations for service providers. Some customers are cooperative and will seek a solution to a problem. Some are indecisive and don't know what they

want. Some are angry and demanding. This segment discusses strategies to use with different types of customers, specifically angry, indecisive, demanding, and rude customers.

Angry customers need to be acknowledged and reassured that they are heard and will be attended to. Service providers need to remain calm and objective with angry customers and ask questions to determine the cause of the problem. Active listening (see description earlier in the chapter) is particularly important with angry customers and can help reduce frustration. Angry customers may need to feel as if they are part of the problem-solving process and may appreciate negotiation during resolution. Follow-up will be especially useful with angry customers to continue to diffuse their dissatisfaction with the organization.

TALKING WITH ANGRY CUSTOMERS

The customer is trying to get help with a computer problem he's experiencing. He's been through a number of "phone menus" and has been unable to reach a human or voicemail. (The mailbox is full.) He finally figures out how to speak to a live human being and he's exceedingly annoyed.

Customer:	What the heck is wrong with you people? I've been going around and around in your voicemail system and I haven't been able to leave a voicemail so I can get some help. I should be able to contact you without having to spend all my money on long-distance charges.
Service Provider:	I am going to help you and I apologize if you've been having problems with our phone system. You're right that this shouldn't happen. Since you've already spent so much time on the phone, can I ask you a few questions so I can help you?
Customer:	Damn right this shouldn't happen! I need help and I need it right away, and I don't deserve to be going around in circles.
Service Provider:	You're right. I'm sure you want that help now, so let me ask you some questions. Are you calling about a technical problem with a computer?
Customer:	Yes.
Service Provider:	OK . . . (Bacal 2005).

Some customers may not be dissatisfied, but they aren't satisfied either when they are at an impasse and cannot make a decision. The indecisive customer knows the overall need as in, I need a new couch, but has difficulty making an actual selection. Indecisive customers look and often ask a lot of questions. They may leave and deliberate and come back or call and ask more questions. They may fear making a mistake or not liking something after their selection has been made. When communicating with these customers, patience will come to the foreground as an important attribute. Asking open-ended questions or making suggestions will guide the customer in the decision-making process. Provide detailed information to confirm how the product or service works. Allow the customer to try samples where possible. Combine you-centered messages and reassurance to the customer using statements such as "You will find that this product . . ." "You will be pleased with the support you will receive after you make your purchase . . ." To guide in the decision making, you can ask "Have you considered . . ." "Have you thought about . . .?" Or stating your opinion, "I think you would like . . ." "It seems you want this one. I think that's a good choice for you."

Demanding and/or domineering customers can be particularly difficult for service providers who have a strong service orientation and want to be helpful. These customers require service providers who remain professional and show respect to the customer. Balancing firmness and fairness is the great challenge with demanding customers. Focusing on the customers' needs and reinforcing what the service provider *can* do for the customer will be helpful.

TALKING WITH DEMANDING CUSTOMERS

The customer is upset because her auto insurance company has offered her much lower compensation for damage to her vehicle than she wanted. After the employee informs her of the settlement offer, she becomes exceedingly angry and, after arguing her case unsuccessfully, starts demanding to talk with the president of the insurance company, who is actually located in another city.

Customer: I've been paying these ridiculous premiums for over 20 years, and this is the third time I've ever made a claim, and you're trying to screw me. I'm through wasting my time with you underlings. I want to speak to the president and I want to speak to him now.

Service Provider:	It's clear you're disappointed in the figures, Mrs. Jones, and I can understand you want to speak to someone you think might be able to help.
Customer:	Damn right! And you aren't going to help much. So, let me speak to the president.
Service Provider:	That would be Maria Pollock, the president of Loveme Insurance. If you want to go that route, instead of something that might be faster and easier for you, I'd be glad to help you get in touch with her. Before I do that, do you want to consider other options first?
Customer:	No, I don't want any "options." I want this Maria Pollock person.
Service Provider:	OK. That's up to you. Maria Pollock is located at the head office in Lubbock. You have a few options that I can help you with. You can phone her office, send her a fax, or write a letter outlining your concerns. If you tell me what you'd prefer, I can give you the information.
Customer:	I want to speak to her *now,* right *now.*
Service Provider:	OK. I understand you want fast action. I'm going to write the president's name and toll-free number down for you, along with your file/incident number and related information. That way you won't have to pay for long distance and you'll have the information you'll need when you speak to her office.
Customer:	Why can't you just call now and give me the phone?
Service Provider:	I'm sure you would prefer to have some privacy for your conversation and be able to call at your convenience.
Customer:	Well, OK.
Service Provider:	If you decide you'd like additional information, please feel free to get in touch with me. And also, if you'd let me know how it goes, I would appreciate that. Anything else we need to do right now?
Customer:	No, I guess not.
Service Provider:	OK. I'm sorry we couldn't come to some agreement. Good luck! (Bacal 2005).

Rude/inconsiderate customers, like the demanding customer, create difficulties for service providers. Service providers should remain professional, avoid retaliation, and rise above the inconsiderate behavior of the customer.

When Things Go Wrong, as They Sometimes Do

Despite careful hiring of service-oriented staff members followed by customer service training, service failures are inevitable. The ability of service providers to respond to these issues is critically important. Sometimes it is through service recovery that customers become highly satisfied or loyal.

A typology of dissatisfied customers helps organizations understand the different responses dissatisfied customers are likely to take after a service failure. Four different types of dissatisfied customers were suggested by Singh (1990; see Figure 4.1): passives, voicers, irates, and activists. *Passives* accounted for 14 percent of Singh's ample (*n* = 465). These dissatisfied customers tell very few people about their dissatisfaction, not even their own network of friends. *Voicers,* who made up 37 percent, complain to the organization without the intent to switch service providers. *Irates* made up 21 percent of the sample. These dissatisfied customers complain to the organization, tell their friends, and switch to another service provider. *Activists* comprise 28 percent of the dissatisfieds. They complain *and* take action outside the organization such as contacting the Better Business Bureau, the media, or a website.
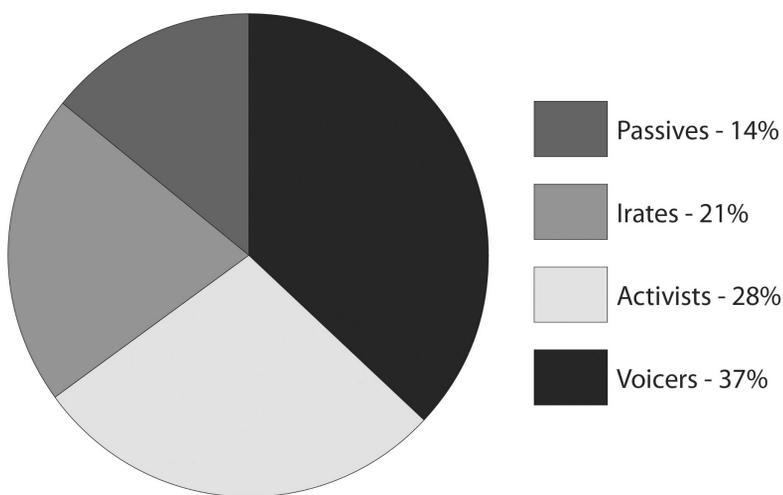
- Passives - 14%
- Irates - 21%
- Activists - 28%
- Voicers - 37%

Figure 4.1   Summary of Tables

There are also customers that organizations don't want. The for-profit sector can strategically target its desired customer and find ways to let unwanted customers go. Some argue, "The customer is always right." Southwest Airlines CEO Herb Kelleher has a different perspective. He argues, "No, they [customers] are not. I think that's one of the biggest betrayals of employees a boss can possibly commit. The customer is sometimes wrong. We don't carry those sorts of customers. We write them and say, 'Fly somebody else. Don't abuse our people'" (Freiberg and Freiberg 1996, 268). Managers need to balance the dignity of service providers with keeping customers. If some customers cause too many problems, take some time to evaluate the return on the customer. Perhaps the organization can let a customer go and invest its energy and resources into other customers.

Soliciting Complaints

The idea of soliciting complaints sounds counterintuitive. However, when organizations treat a complaint as a gift (Barlow, Moller, and Hsieh 2008), the organization receives information that can help them make improvements to their processes and services. Customer relationship management (Fitzgerald and Doerfel 2004) is a "business strategy aimed at building and maintaining long-term relationships with customers through two-way communication, gathering and storing information regarding consumer preferences, and using the information to meet both parties' goals" (232). By contrast, customer handling refers to placating unhappy customers. It is therefore important to provide avenues for customers to share their complaints and for the customer to get feedback indicating the appreciation and value of the information. Organizations need to let customers know they want feedback. JCPenney associates regularly ask customers for feedback by asking the customer to fill out an online survey, circling the web address on the receipt, and handwriting their names on the receipt so that customers will remember who served them. This practice lets customers know that JCPenney is interested in their opinions about the service. Other ways to solicit feedback from customers include providing toll-free numbers, web addresses with places to submit information, or the direct question to the customer during a face-to-face interaction. Asking a customer, "What do you think of our service?" with a genuine tone lets the customer know his/her ideas are wanted. The standard "How is everything" asked by the servers at restaurants conveys the right idea, but the tone seldom invites a sincere dialogue about the quality of the food or service. Other options to solicit feedback include customer comment cards placed in strategic locations in the organization's facilities

that customers can pick up and fill out. Providing a convenient location to send completed forms makes it easy for the customer to get the information to the respective person at the organization.

Staff members also need to be aware of what they can do when they receive feedback from customers. Service providers can be trained to respond favorably to customer complaints, but are they empowered to take the next step and alert management about the opportunity for improvement? Ritz Carlton employees are trusted with $2,000 per guest per day to engage in service enhancement or recovery efforts (Michelli 2008). Service providers are often good at fixing a problem in the short term. However, an organization that is highly responsive will also make sure service providers can voice their concerns and share customers' experiences to look for ways to make improvements in the product or service that meet customers' needs. Calling customers after a purchase or interaction with the organization is another way to solicit information. Lowe's calls customers after they have had an appliance installed to gauge the quality and professionalism of the installer. Short surveys can be used, especially if the organization serves many customers. Small business owners may be able to have an informal conversation to get input. The phone call also has an advantage over e-mailed surveys because of the personal contact and opportunity for the customer to provide explanations to answers. Customer informants are another way for managers to evaluate service providers. Mystery shoppers have been utilized in the retail and hospitality industries for years and are a way to gather evidence about the service provided. This approach needs to be done multiple times because one person's experience may not provide the depth of information needed to understand systemic issues in the organization. One cashier may provide outstanding service because of prior training with another organization, not because of specific training offered by the current organization. When possible, visiting the customer while using the product can be helpful. John Deere service technicians schedule ride-alongs with new tractor owners to serve the dual purpose of training the farmer to operate the equipment and to get information from the farmer about the functionality of the equipment. Finally, an organization will need to repeatedly ask customers to provide feedback. Just as marketers repeatedly send messages to prospective clients, existing customers also need repeated messages to understand the seriousness and value placed upon getting information from customers.

Service Recovery

There are several ways to respond to dissatisfied customers. The response has important consequences for customer satisfaction and loyalty.

For example, when customers' problems are fixed, they report very high customer satisfaction but when service providers blame others for problems, customer satisfaction is low (Punyanunt-Carter, Planisek, and Cornette 2006). Further, organizations that have decreased their customer defection rate by 5 percent increased their profitability by as much as 20 percent (Reichheld and Sasser 1990). Here is a suggested eight-step approach to service recovery:

1. Say thank you—tell the customer you are glad to receive the information and know about their issues. Remember, a complaint is a gift.
2. Explain why the complaint is appreciated.
3. Apologize. The apology should focus on the experience and not make the service provider feel personally responsible. For example, tell the customer, "I'm sorry to hear your new water heater isn't working properly" instead of "I'm so sorry." The personal I'm sorry statement makes the service provider sound accountable for actions he or she had no control over and can diminish credibility. However, the customer expects to hear an apology and being specific about the issue focuses on the incident, rather than the people. However, if the service provider did make a mistake and is with the customer, then personal responsibility is expected by extending a personal apology for a mistake or service failure.
4. Promise to do something immediately. Customers expect problems to be solved quickly. At a minimum, they expect to know that their issue is being attended to. Telling a customer who returned with a radiator that still isn't fixed that it will be two more weeks before the car can be looked at again is not going to make the auto owner happy. Perhaps the car cannot be fixed today, but it should be started as soon as possible and the customer should know the car will be looked at soon. Of course, these promises should be honest answers, not information the customer wants to hear. Giving a customer known misinformation to string them along makes customers angry.
5. Ask for necessary information. Taking the time to gather relevant information will increase the likelihood that the issue will be resolved accurately and to the customer's satisfaction.
6. Take action. The customer may need to provide specific information about the service failure so asking for necessary information may be warranted. However, if the customer has been passed through multiple service providers, minimize the repetitive questions by documenting information or telling the next service provider what the issue is. When customers tell several members of an organization the same story about their faulty product or service, they relive their frustration with the service failure and increase their frustration by retelling the story.
7. Correct the mistake as quickly as possible ensuring accuracy and safety. One participant in a research study noted that when her food order was

improperly prepared, she received an apology, a free replacement meal, and a gift certificate to return (Punyanunt-Carter, Planisek, and Cornette 2006).

8. Check customer satisfaction by following up with the customer to make sure the service recovery was successful. Then, take preventive measures to prevent future mistakes. Fixing a problem one time does not keep the issue from happening again. Organizations must be proactive by identifying areas of service failure and correcting issues to keep them from happening again.

This eight-step approach provides an overview of considerations for service recovery. When conflict escalates, particularly with clients who have a high degree of interdependence with the organization, an approach called "the script" provides one suggested pattern of statements to make. After reading *Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?* by psychologist John Powell (1969) and *Nonviolent Communication* by Marshall Rosenberg (2005), the script emerged as a communication skill I've used personally and recommended to interpersonal communication students. The script also has useful applications to organizational environments when modified appropriately. The script includes a series of four statements that guide a person through disclosing his/her needs or wants during a conflict or difficult situation. Each statement begins with a particular I-statement and is introduced in the following text:

"I Noticed." The I noticed statement is designed for the speaker to tell the recipient about an observed behavior. The focus with this statement is that it relies on evidence such as observed statements or behaviors. It does not rely on assumptions or opinions. This approach is particularly helpful for conflict communication because it diminishes hostile mind reading (Gottman 1994) and focuses on actual events. For example, a service provider might say to a customer, "I noticed you were very angry when you came into the store." You could modify this statement by saying "You seem . . ." Here, you are focused on your own perception without accusing the person or making an assumption about his or her behavior, which could put the person on the defensive and escalate the person's anger. For example, the service provider could say, "You seem angry" or "You seem dissatisfied." This allows the service provider to state his/her observation or perception, which conveys to the recipient the basis for subsequent statements.

"I Thought." The I thought statement allows the speaker to express what his/her understanding or expectation for the behavior was. For example, a service provider might say, "I thought you understood the procedures for using the product after our discussion yesterday." This usage of the word "thought" is a literal interpretation. It is not intended to convey an

opinion as people commonly say "I think" when expressing an opinion or idea.

"I Feel." The I feel statement gives the speaker the opportunity to convey his/her feelings about the situation, to show the effect of the person's behavior as identified in statement one. For example, a service provider might say, "I feel uncomfortable talking to people who are this angry." In reality, the use of feeling statements is often discouraged in work settings. Therefore, this statement can be modified by stating, "I am (insert adjective)" to convey the speaker's reaction to the expressed behavior. For example, the service provider might say, "I'm uncomfortable with your anger."

"I Need." The I need statement gives the speaker the opportunity to ask for what he or she needs to continue with the conversation. For example, the service provider could say, "I need you to step aside and calm down for 20 minutes."

Some customers will respond to this approach and realize that their anger is diminishing their ability to continue the transaction and get their needs met. The key to asking an angry customer to step aside is to reassure the customer how important he/she is and how committed you are to solving the problem. The service provider needs the customer to calm down to be of assistance. However, not all customers will react favorably to the script. Therefore, other strategies will be needed to give the angry customer a "time out." Sometimes, speaking to a manager can calm down an angry customer.

There are many facets to customer communication from the verbal message, to the nonverbal communication behaviors, to the strategies to use for different types of customers and situations. This chapter introduces many elements to show ways to talk with the customer in every transaction, which reduces the number of service failures. In addition, information has been introduced that discusses how to recover when service failures occur. In addition, there are at least three trends that impact customer communication and the ways in which service is provided to customers. These trends are technology, call centers, and globalization. Each of these aspects could be a chapter of its own, so highlights of these three trends are introduced here with the recommendation to seek further reading on these trends.

Technology, Call Centers, and Globalization

Call centers are arguably "the most important single source of customer contact in the developed information economies" (Russell 2008, 195). Call centers emerged as a prominent component of business operations

in the early 1990s. They continue to increase in utilization, as much as 1,200 percent from 2000 to 2003 (Mirchandani 2004), and geographic reach to India, Ireland, Canada, and Australia (Granered 2005), among others. FedEx alone has 16 call centers in the United States and 35 overseas processing 500,000 calls each day (Xu 1999–2000). At the heart of these call centers operate a multitude of communications technologies, including "integrated voice recognition systems, predictive dialing capacity, blended in-bound and out-bound call functionality, web articulation, and drop-down call and screen capture systems" (Xu 1999–2000 197). This convergence of technology, call centers, and culture creates a new dynamic for executing extraordinary customer communication.

In the global business environment, CSRs who work in call centers receive extensive training on both customer communication and cultural differences. For example, employees in many Indian call centers watch U.S. sitcoms to learn more about the language and culture and take on an alternate identity, most notably by taking an American name (Pal and Buzzanell 2008). CSRs are also trained to change their accent and modify their grammar and vocabulary to conform to the English spoken in the United States (Mirchandani 2004).

These call centers offer advantages and disadvantages for U.S. organizations and customers. While there are several considerations businesses must make when deciding to outsource customer service and use a call center, those factors that impact customer communication will be the factors introduced here. It is important for all decision makers to be at the table and discuss cost, staffing, logistics, and customer impact. Customer communication considerations weigh in on this discussion.

Advantages of call centers include employees who specialize in customer service, a large supply of English speaking employees with low labor costs, and employees who are willing to work hours when customers are most likely to call, despite the local time. The disadvantages of call centers include employees' accents that clearly identify them as non-U.S. employees, negative stereotypes of non-U.S. English speakers, rigid scripts that make employees sound unnatural, high context communication, distinguishing between British and American English, and the pragmatics of language use.

Technological innovations are another trend and are quickly increasing to provide customer service. Shifting customer service to online support systems or service providers available by instant messaging, among other platforms, have advantages and disadvantages. Advantages include low cost and immediate customer feedback. Disadvantages include trying to service customers who do not have the requisite technological tools or expertise, complex problems that cannot be answered with basic

troubleshooting, and customers' desires for the human connection. Organizations will need to continue to investigate emerging technologies and evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using technology.

It is important to note that the suggestions made in this chapter revolve around organizations in the United States communicating with customers in the United States. The dominant culture in the United States favors individualistic, high uncertainty avoidance, low power distance, masculine communication characteristics (Hofstede 1980). However, two possibilities emerge that challenge this status quo. First, those in the United States who are not in the dominant culture have different communication characteristics. Second, foreigners will also be customers. The hospitality and tourism industry has long catered to this norm by hiring staff who speak other languages. As foreigners and immigrants travel, work, and move to the interior of the country and/or to less urban areas, more and more English speakers will need to understand the nuances of intercultural communication, a subject too extensive to review here. However, business managers would be wise to study and examine the communication characteristics of specific cultures that tend to live, work, or travel in their respective region.

Conclusion

Communicating with customers in ways that show respect, courtesy, and helpfulness can alleviate many service issues. As the opening vignette highlighted, exceeding customer expectations at Hy-Vee, an organization that has always emphasized customer service, has helped this regional grocer compete with large retailers such as Wal-Mart. As this chapter has shown, outstanding customer service has a positive result on financial performance and customer loyalty.

Key Takeaways

1. Customer service has a positive influence on financial performance.
2. Customer type and industry type must be considered when creating customer communication expectations.
3. Courtesy rates higher than small talk, being sociable, or sharing private information.
4. You-centered messages and I-centered messages are each important at key moments during interactions with customers.
5. Verbal communication skills include greetings, using positive language, avoiding customer pet peeves, and creating a supportive communication climate.
6. Listening and nonverbal communication are critical aspects of customer communication that service providers need training on.

7. Treat customer complaints as gifts; reinforce to customers the value of their feedback; communicate avenues for customers to provide their comments.
8. Follow the eight-step approach or the script as models for responding to dissatisfied customers or clients.
9. Technology, call centers, and globalization impact customer communication in both positive and negative ways; make sure someone who advocates for the customer is involved with decisions about each of these topics.

Glossary

Active listening: An attempt to demonstrate unconditional acceptance and unbiased reflection by a therapist of a client's experience.

Appearance: An aspect of nonverbal communication that includes what they wear, hygiene, and other artifacts worn on the body.

Chronemics: All aspects of the use of time.

Client: A repeat customer who has considerable interdependence with the organization and/or service provider.

Courtesies: Greetings and thank yous characterized by warmth and friendliness.

Customer: The recipient of the goods and/or services provided by an organization.

Customer communication: Focuses on the points of intersection between the customer and the service provider.

Customer handling: Placating unhappy customers.

Customer relationship management: A business strategy aimed at building and maintaining long-term relationships with customers through two-way communication, gathering and storing information regarding consumer preferences, and using the information to meet both parties' goals.

Customer service: The service provided in support of an organization's core products; the ability of knowledgeable, capable, and enthusiastic employees to deliver products and services to their internal and external customers in a manner that satisfies identified and unidentified needs and ultimately results in positive word-of-mouth publicity and return business.

Defensive communication climate: Individuals feel rejected, disrespected, and invalidated.

Facial expressions: Movement of the eyebrows, eyelids, nose, and mouth.

Haptics: The study of how touch impacts human communication.

Hearing: The physical ability to receive sounds.

Jargon: Unique language or vocabulary used within a specific organization.

Kinesics: Nonverbal gestures that involve body motion.

Listening: The cognitive process of interpreting information received and trying to understand the needs and wants of the customer.

Mindful listening: The ability to receive the spoken word accurately, retain information, sustain attention, attend to your own responsive speech, and encourage the speaker.

Oculesics: The study of how eye behavior impacts human communication.

Patronizing speech: Slow, oversimplified, polite, and overly warm.

Pleasantries: Synonymous with small talk.

Privacies: Sharing personal information, demonstrating support, consolation, or confession.

Proxemics: Nonverbal communication behaviors that refer to the physical distance between those who are communicating.

Pseudorelationships: Characterized by repeat interactions with the same organization but the customer could interact with various service providers.

Service encounters: Brief and occur only once with no expectation for repeat interaction with the same person.

Service relationships: Seeing the same service provider on repeat interactions.

Sociabilities: Extend beyond small talk into joking, gossiping, or complaining.

Sociality communication: Performance that encourages a cooperative, social smoothness, void of intense interactions with others.

Supportive communication climate: Individuals feel valued, cherished, and respected.

Vocal cues: Any aspect of sound delivered from the mouth without forming words.

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