

Train Your Customer Service Reps to Create Magical Customer Service

By Diane Berenbaum and Jean Marie Johnson

“I can help you with that right now.” A MAGIC® response from a trained customer service representative that translates into a great service experience; the type of response that Makes A Great Impression on every Customer. An exceptional interaction between the customer and a service representative can make customers feel special. On the flip side, a tragic statement from a rep, “We can’t do that” ...” can make customers feel frustrated and angry.

Organizations tout that they offer great service, yet, there are significant disconnects between these proclamations and actual customer experiences. At the heart of this profound discrepancy is the absence of making ongoing investments in the effective training and development of customer service reps.

Exceptional customer service reps are a priceless asset to any organization. Their contributions are rooted in a sense of purpose and commitment, supported by training. In contrast, many reps perform based upon compliance, a limited sense of meaningful contribution and mediocre training. When effectively engaged, trained and coached, they will provide exemplary customer service and help to increase your sales and referrals.

Create the Context

Many well-intentioned managers give directions to their training departments that sound like this: “Our reps don’t seem to care. We need to tell them what to say on the phone so they don’t sound so rude.” Or, more benignly, “Teach them to be polite; that the customer is always right.”

While these statements are often well-intentioned, they completely miss the bigger picture. The delivery of great service begins with a set of shared values around what it means to deliver magical service. Once these values and behaviors are positioned front and center, development and accountability can follow.

Here is an example: the employees in a large food service company used the acronym of “RESPECT” to highlight their commitment to outstanding service: **R**igorous attention to detail, **E**ffective communication, **S**eamless deliveries, **P**rofessionalism, **E**fficiency, **C**ourtesy and **T**rustworthiness. The simplicity and clarity of this focus help drive their moment to moment behaviors that create their customer experiences.

Define and Train to a Standard; A Common Language for Your Organization

Once you identify the behaviors aligned with your values, you can develop a standard to be used in training that is based on these behaviors. This standard provides a common language and disciplines that create a unique cultural identity.

Design Customer Service Training Focused on Attitudes and Behaviors:

Focus on Mind-set, Relationship and Accountability

Focus your training content on three key themes; mind-set, relationship and accountability, to develop and empower reps to delight customers.

Embrace a Service Mind-set

Can your reps say, “We’re all about service” and really mean it? This statement could only come from a deeply-rooted commitment; a mind-set of contribution. And, like it or not, it is a choice. You cannot demand it or command it. But, you can encourage it. Imagine introducing this concept at the very start of your program: *“Every person you communicate with is your customer—whether they are internal or external to the organization.”* Every associate in every department is indeed a customer, whether they work in Human Resources or in the adjacent cubicle. When reps broaden their thinking in this way, suddenly, every one “counts”.

A corollary concept is that *“Every communication makes an impression.”* To illustrate just how many impressions reps make in a day, a simple tally can be taken that includes: People I interact with, Calls I take, Calls I make, E-mails I initiate, E-mails I respond to, and Voicemails I leave. If a rep has 245 interactions daily, this translates to 1,225 weekly, 4,900 monthly and 58,800 annually. That is a tremendous number of opportunities to make an impression; an impression that increases customer loyalty, or turns off customers and sends them racing to another supplier!

Cultivate Relationships with Customers

Training that focuses on getting the task done puts the cart before the horse. Attending to the human side of service is the first imperative of a person-to-person interaction. Reps need the skills to engage with customers—internally and externally—in a way that builds relationships. These skills go far beyond being courteous and nice. They are about *making a connection* with the customer, as well as earning the right to *take control* of an interaction—gracefully.

Behaviors that focus on relationships include the words, tone and visual impact of the first few seconds of an interaction—the greeting. They also include a laser-sharp focus on developing listening skills and the expression of empathy—the ability to identify and acknowledge how a customer experiences a situation. Simply put, how the customer feels.

You may get some pushback from reps that tend to focus on the task without paying attention to the human dimension. This narrow focus may resolve the issue in the short-term, but may ultimately erode the relationship. Focusing on the relationship first actually shortens interactions—customers are far more likely to “let go” when they feel they are working with a caring, confident professional.

By allowing time for associates to practice the critical first moments of an interaction—the greeting and the initial response to customers—you are helping them to replace old behaviors with new behaviors that express your service values. These behavioral changes take time, practice and support.

For example, imagine that a customer fumes, “You made a mistake on my statement again! What’s wrong with you people?” A rep might respond from habit, saying “What’s your account number? I’ll see what’s going on.” A magical, trained rep with a commitment to service responds, “Mr. Jones, I can understand why you’d be upset about your statement. I would be happy to help you. May I ask you a few questions first so that I can better research this matter?” The customer is likely to perceive the sincerity of this response, and feel secure that he is interacting with someone who wants to help him. He then relaxes as he and the rep work toward resolution. The few mind-ful moments the rep takes to connect with the customer’s experience and to reassure him of his help are what focusing on the relationship are all about.

Focus on Accountability

Accountability refers to communicating professionally while choosing to do everything you can to address the customer’s need. And that happens by focusing on what you can control and what you can influence. A rep can control every response and action he takes in an interaction with a customer. Those choices, in turn, influence the customer’s responses, and his perception of the service experience. Exercising choice is no small matter.

A training focus on accountability begins with the essentials such as exercises on active listening, asking appropriate questions, being proactive with solutions or options and following up as agreed. And it also focuses on developing your reps’ ability to use *customer-focused communication* instead of *barriers-focused communication*. In other words, seeing the situation from the customer’s perspective and using language to demonstrate what can be done, rather than the reasons something cannot be done.

Accountability also means being able to step up to the plate when mistakes or oversights happen. While all customers want their service providers to be accountable to their needs, dissatisfied customers want much more. They want explanations about the causes of the situation, assurances that their concerns will be corrected and apologies, when appropriate.

Ensure Training is Engaging and Participatory

Typical “tell” training, with right and wrong answers, results in half-hearted compliance because it fails to engage the hearts and minds of reps. On the other hand, interpersonal skills training that is both interactive and inclusive results in a rich learning experience and greater commitment. Authentic dialogue and realistic scenarios will encourage your reps’ receptivity and willingness to adopt new skills.

Sustain the Service Culture

Provide Coaching, Feedback and Support

Service training needs a commitment of time and support to sustain results. Companies who implement call quality programs after customer service training significantly improved both customer satisfaction ranging from 4% to 10% and call quality ranging from 6% to 15%, according to the 2006 Ascent Group Call Quality Practices study.

The reality is that a quality program without effective coaching may quickly become a watchdog patrol. Effective coaching models the relationship first principle, while setting and upholding performance standards. It is rooted in respect for customer service reps and supports their contribution to the customer experience.

And it does not stop there. When you model desired behavior, reinforce skills, and address systemic barriers to exceptional service, you will pave the way to helping your organization deliver sustainable, truly magical service.

Magical Training Yields Exceptional Results

Service training programs, which are aligned with your organization's values and fully supported by coaching and modeling, clearly demonstrate your commitment to your customers and your employees. Not only will your employees look forward to their next call, they will approach each customer with a smile, knowing that they can make each contact MAGIC. And, soon, your organization's service levels and customer satisfaction measures will rise and shine above the rest.

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