

Employer's Advantage

From Jim Sirbasku: Walking the Customer Service Walk

7 Steps to Superb Customer Service

Case Study: A Decrease in Turnover Using the Customer Service Profile™

Product Focus: Customer Service Profile™ Makes Your Wishes Come True

Book Review: The Power of Making Nice

Strategies for Winning: Talk 'em Down!

Customer Service: Walking the Customer Service Walk

A How-Not-To, and a How-To

The stories we hear and read about customer service these days should frighten any executive into making clandestine calls to her own office to check out what's *really* going on at home. It's an old trick, but if all CEOs made such calls on a regular basis, we might usher in a new age of enlightenment.

In spite of a proliferation of tales about bad customer service, some of them amplified on Web blogs to thousands of people, customer service horror stories continue.

From some of these incidents, we can divine this sure-fire philosophy for driving away customers:

- Never talk to them. Keep them on hold on the phone, and don't answer their e-mails. Tie them up in voice mail so that they never get to talk to a real person.
- If they persist in phoning in and demand to speak to a person, make sure they get transferred so that they have to repeat their problem again and again.
- Make them stand in a long line each time they visit your business.
- Tell your salespeople that it isn't important for them to know about your products, and don't ever empower a salesperson to solve a problem. Make your CSR go to four or five other people first.

- Reward the salesperson's surly attitude by never correcting it.
- Don't trust customers, for they are never right. If they tell you your product is defective, assume the problem is their fault.

I believe the old adage that customers vote with their feet. And with the cost of finding a new customer at 10 times the cost of retaining one, I don't think any of us can afford that kind of fancy footwork. I also believe that all of us, no matter the business or industry, must take a hard look at customer service. The problems don't populate just one business or industry; you can find them in banking, retail, health care, insurance and airlines.

Still, some companies don't get it. They have hired the wrong people, or gone to the self-service model of customer service, or made their customer service someone else's problem and called it outsourcing. They have pinched pennies, convinced they are saving money, when in reality they are losing customers and may eventually lose the store. Meanwhile, they hang up a sign that says, "Customers Come First" and hope that their employees get it.

The bad news is that no one ever gets anything from a sign like that; it's not that easy. The good news is that hiring the right people and training them is not impossible, either, and can make your organization hum like a well-tuned engine.

As with any good professional practice, good customer service starts with a set of standards or values that the company wants employees to embrace when serving customers. Then our managers hire the people who most closely match those standards. Assessments help identify job candidates whose attitudes match ours. Ideally, we all want to hire workers with the customer service "soul," perhaps imprinted on them by their mother when they were just babes. But it's not as obvious as Harry Potter's lightning bolt; you can't see this imprint just by looking at someone, or listening to her talk.

(continued)

Once the right person is in the right position, managers can't just walk away, believing their job is done. The best companies offer employees continued, focused training in customer service.

As we all try to remain competitive while retaining customers, we must remember that people, both the customer and the one serving the customer, are the most important ingredients in the business equation.

By all means, we should use every technological advancement available to further our goals in this increasingly complicated world. But in our haste, we cannot forget the people part. As one infuriated blogger wrote, "Without customers, there is no business."



Jim Sirbasku, CEO
Profiles International

BOOK REVIEW: *THE POWER OF NICE: How to Conquer the Business World with Kindness*

Executives and business owners seeking the excellent customer service formula can look to *THE POWER OF NICE* for ideas. Corny to suggest that merely acting nice works? Maybe, but there's evidence that it does.

Linda Kaplan Thaler, co-author of the *THE POWER OF NICE* and owner of the fastest growing advertising agency in the United States, maintains that even not-so-nice people can learn how to be nice. She offers a "NiceQ Test" on the book's website, www.thepowerofnice.com, so that everyone can judge his own nice quotient and see what areas or traits need work.

Or we can read the book and discover more, including how treating people well has put Kaplan Thaler and her co-author, Robin Koval, at the head of the class. We learn in Chapter 1 how the security guard in their building helped land a prominent client for the Kaplan Thaler Group. The potential client was from Minneapolis and felt apprehensive about coming face-to-face with the legendary rudeness of New Yorkers. The friendly security guard disproved the legend with his helpfulness.

Watching Diane Brady interview Kaplan Thaler in "Video Views" on BusinessWeek.com, you get the feeling that the author sincerely means what she says about the power of making nice. Whether you call it good karma or good business practice, it's easy to believe the tale about an assistant whom she was nice to years ago coming back to her with loads of business.

Kaplan Thaler told an interviewer for *The Columbia Journalist* that the inspiration for *THE POWER OF NICE* stemmed from an experience early in her life. Her father worked at a toy company, and as a child she accompanied him to work. He asked his secretary if she wanted coffee, Kaplan Thaler said. She asked her father, "Isn't she supposed to do that for you?" He told her, "The people who support you, you get them coffee."

In addition to anecdotal evidence, Kaplan Thaler and Koval have done their homework. They note that organizations that try to operate under the "nice" mantra get sued less often and show lower recruitment costs, lower turnover and higher productivity than their counterparts. Their employees are also healthier. And a survey the agency took, quoted in *Parade* magazine, reveals that 79 percent of employees believe that nicer people prevail in the office over their more aggressive and political colleagues, and that 81 percent believe their bosses are nice.

Still, nice does not always prevail. Kaplan Thaler told Brady that "people think they are nicer than they actually are."

Interesting tidbits from *NICE*:

- You can be a total jerk and still be nice—niceness is a skill, not a personality trait, they say.
- Negative energy takes a big bite out of the work environment.
- People choose whom to be nice to.

If you read the book and want more, or if you want more before you get the book, check out the website. In addition to the NiceQ Test and a couple of videos, the index includes "Nice Buzz," which showcases the headlines this book has made.

Kaplan Thaler is the CEO and chief creative officer of the Kaplan Thaler Group, and Koval is the president. The two also co-authored the national bestseller *BANG!: GETTING YOUR MESSAGE HEARD IN A NOISY WORLD*. *Advertising Age* ranked their agency as the fastest growing advertising agency in the United States, and the agency is the winner of 13 Clio Awards.

ABOUT THE BOOK

THE POWER OF NICE: How to Conquer the Business World with Kindness

Authors: Linda Kaplan Thaler and Robin Koval

Publisher: Doubleday/Currency

ISBN 978-0-385-51892-5 (0-385-51892-7)

144 pages

CASE STUDY: A Decrease in Turnover Using Customer Service Profile™

What type of employees does your organization hire for customer service? Do they like dealing with people? Are they tactful? Do they listen well? These behaviors are paramount in any organization that promotes good customer service, and the keys to this particular kingdom are hiring the right people and retaining the ones that meet your high standards.

This case study examines the steps a financial services organization in Louisiana took in an attempt to improve employee retention. Over a two-year period, Profiles International staff helped the company examine the relationship between employee turnover and job candidates' match to the customer service position. Part of the study included measuring the degree of alignment between the jobseeker's customer service perspective and the specific expectations of the company in which the candidate was seeking a job.

Method

The organization administered the Customer Service Profile to 1,287 jobseekers. The company developed a Job Match Pattern that reflects its views on customer service. Participants who respond in a similar manner to the organization's views implicitly share the organization's belief in customer service, and managers perceive them as a stronger fit for customer relations than those who don't respond in a like manner.

Job Match percentages were assessed this way:

- 80 percent or greater job match, strong fit to the job.
- 79 percent or less job match, weak fit to the job.

The organization hired 226 of the candidates who participated in the study. Of those, 166 were seen as a strong fit for their positions, and 60 were seen as a weak fit.

Over the 2-year period, the company also tracked the 226 workers' employment status within the organization, including turnover figures. The results? The turnover rate of the employees demonstrating a strong fit to the position was 61 of 166, or 36.7 percent. The turnover rate of employees demonstrating a weak fit to the position was 25 of 60, or 41.7 percent.

Results

This organization has shown the ability to successfully predict employee turnover based on Job Match percentage. The study showed a reduction in turnover of 12 percent, which helps in the expensive areas of selecting and training new people. By using the Customer Service Profile™, this organization will continue to hire candidates that it is more likely to retain.

The Job Match Pattern now serves as the organization's benchmark for matching other employees.

CUSTOMER SERVICE QUOTES

We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.

Epictetus, Greek philosopher

Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen. **Winston Churchill, British leader**

A business that makes nothing but money is a poor business. **Henry Ford, founder of Ford Motor Company**

Your most unhappy customers are your greatest source of learning. **Bill Gates, Microsoft chairman, in Business @ the Speed of Thought**

It's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice. **Author Unknown**

STRATEGIES FOR WINNING: Talk 'Em Down!* Make Customer Complaints Work for You

One day, we received a call from one of our Strategic Partners who said she was about to lose her biggest client because of a glitch in our e-mail system. How did this happen?

The first step in fixing the problem was to gather all of the facts. The e-mail problem had originated when we installed new software that was not properly configured. The situation got worse when the client called our office seeking technical assistance and was given instructions that didn't work.

We quickly called a meeting of the people involved and soon had a temporary solution to use until we developed a permanent solution. Our Operations Vice President implemented the appropriate actions immediately. We called the Strategic Partner and gave her an update on the situation. Next, we contacted the client and explained our situation, apologized for the inconvenience, and presented the temporary solution. We not only saved the account, we were also complimented for how quickly we responded to the situation. Through quick attention to the problem and attention to the client, we turned a potentially bad situation into a very positive one.

We recommend you consider customer complains in a positive frame of mind and see them as suggestions for improving your products and the way you do business.

No matter how good you and your people are, or how good your products/services are, you will occasionally encounter an angry customer. A normally reasonable, happy customer who gets angry transforms into a flesh-eating beast, bent on your destruction. Sometimes they come at you foaming at the mouth and demanding satisfaction. How do you talk 'em down from the ceiling?



There are two traditional ways. The first is to eat crow immediately, accept the blame fully, beg forgiveness, kiss up, and do everything the customer-turned beast asks in order to satisfy them. You'll likely keep the customer, but after you've crawled like that more than a few

times, can you look at yourself in the mirror and smile?

Another approach is to get angry back at the customer, slug it out with them (verbally, at least), exchange blame and insults, deny all responsibility and tell them where to get off. That way you needn't worry about repeat complaints. After all, no customers, no complaints.

Calming angry customers and resolving complaints to their complete satisfaction need not mean sacrificing your self-respect. Experts have demonstrated that the following guidelines will resolve more problems more easily, and turn a complaint into a more positive experience for the customer. Plus, you will still be able to look at yourself in the mirror and smile!

1. It's Your Problem, But Don't Take it Personally

It may not be your fault, but it's still your problem. Approach all angry customers with this attitude. Even if it is your fault, don't take the complaint personally. Customers complain because they want you to address a perceived shortcoming, not because they don't like you. Resist the temptation to fight back. Even if you win the battle, you'll lose the war. And the customer.

2. Listen

In order to address the customer's problem, you'll need to know exactly what the problem is. As with all other endeavors, listening is a key skill. Shut up and listen carefully. Besides giving you some insight into the reason for the customer's distress, it also helps to exorcise some of the initial anger the customer is feeling.

3. Don't Interrupt

Let complainants express themselves. Don't stop them mid-flow. Let them vent their anger; it will be easier to reason with them afterwards.

4. Calm Your Complainant and Clarify the Problem

When your customer has finished complaining, show some empathy. Explain that you understand why he or she is so upset, and you're going to try to sort things out. Then clarify your understanding of the problem. Ask questions and qualify comments. This will calm your customer and ensure that your suggested solution will address all aspects of the perceived problem. Step into your customer's shoes. Look at your company, your products, the problem and your actions from the customer's perspective, and then decide whether or not the complaint is justified.

(continued)

5. If it's Your Fault, Say So—If it's Not, Don't

When you fully understand the complaint, decide whether or not your company is at fault. Don't automatically accept blame before you know it's warranted. But if it is clearly your fault, admit it early in the process. Accept responsibility and don't hide; don't try to pass the buck. Adopt a genuinely humble tone.

6. Solve the Problem

Think about how best to solve the customer's problems. If you need some time to come up with a response, tell them so and commit to getting back to them on a specified timetable, and do so. Make sure all of your responses project a clearly concerned but calm manner. Stress your eagerness to resolve the problem, and project a calm confidence that you are the person to do it. When you have a suggested solution, agree with the customer the steps you'll take and the timeframe for correction. Assure the customer that you'll take personal responsibility for seeing the resolution through, and do so. Nothing is more important than resolving customer complaints. Attend to them with the utmost urgency. Research shows that it costs as much as ten times more to recruit a new customer than to retain one you already recruited.

7. Don't Accept Abuse

Don't accept it if a complainant steps over the line between the reasonable right to complain and outright personal abuse. Calmly explain that you will address problems, but you can do so only if they speak and act courteously and respectfully. If they continue with their abuse, terminate the conversation. You don't need that kind of customer!

8. Pin Down Moving Targets

If you're dealing with a problem that seems to grow every time you implement an agreed solution, ask your customer to put the complaint in writing so you can better understand and address it. This will help you to focus upon an agreed solution. Also, working things out on paper can sometimes make a complainant recognize if theirs is an unreasonable viewpoint.

9. Stop it from Happening Again

Try to prevent angering customers in the future:

- At purchase time, let your customers know it is your policy to resolve any difficulties they might encounter with their purchase. Then, should they call to complain, their stress levels should be a little lower given their confidence of receiving good support.
- Keep in touch. If something's about to happen that might upset customers, let them know before it's an issue.

When a customer identifies a problem, change what you do to minimize the chance of the problem recurring.

Customers who take the time to complain are generally telling you they want to continue doing business with you, but with some changes. Put a high priority on resolving their difficulties, but don't ever feel you must sacrifice your own self-esteem to do so.



**From the book 40 STRATEGIES FOR WINNING IN BUSINESS by Bud Haney and Jim Sirbasku. © S&H Publishing Co., 5205 Lake Shore Drive, Waco, Texas 76710-1732. All rights reserved. Contact S&H Publishing Co., (254) 751-1644, for reprint permission.*

SEVEN STEPS TO SUPERB CUSTOMER SERVICE

S stands for product savviness and salesmanship. We're much more effective selling the product if we know how it works.

E is for ears. Use them to hear what the customer wants and needs. Don't interrupt. Do ask questions so you will fully understand.

R means responsibility. Seize it, and give customers confidence that you hear them and will help them.

V is for value of the product and the organization standing behind it.

I represents initiative, or doing what needs to be done, and ingenuity or inventiveness.

C stands for courtesy. Consider everyone an important customer, whether that person works inside the company or is stepping in from the outside to purchase something.

E stands for ethics. Treating people with respect and fairness bodes well for a constant supply of customers.

PRODUCT FOCUS: Customer Service Profile™ Makes Your Wishes Come True

If you watch your best customer service employees work their magic, you've likely wished you could clone them. In their bag of tricks are all the right words: empathy, tactfulness, intelligence, sensitivity, sense of humor. Not only that, they know how to *show* these behaviors—they know your business inside-out.

Cloning them is out of the question. But what if you could spread their beneficial behavior throughout your organization? It's not magic and it's not too good to be true. With Profiles International's Customer Service Profile™, you can hire the people who match your company's high standards, and you can quickly pinpoint the areas where your organization would benefit from coaching.

All of your employees, not just those who have the words "customer service" in their title, need to serve customers. Everyone who works for an organization is its representative. That's the way customers perceive the situation, and that's the way you should see it, too. But how do you communicate that to your employees?

This vital bit of communication is easier if you hire people with the right attitudes. This is where the Customer Service Profile™ provides invaluable help. It assesses the beliefs and customer service proficiency of employees and job candidates. This gives you the critical information you need to hire people with the skills you desire, improve training in a vital area and increase awareness that every employee is involved in customer service.

The assessment tool measures such characteristics as tact, trust, empathy, conformity, focus and flexibility. It also measures skill level in vocabulary and mathematics. It measures how each person's perspective on serving customers aligns with the organization's policies and attitudes.

With the Customer Service Profile™, which is available in custom form for the healthcare, hospitality, financial and retail industries, you get three types of reports:

- Placement report: tells you how well job candidates match your standards and the degree of alignment between a candidate's perspective and the company's.
 - Coaching report: shows you the areas in which individualized training/coaching will instill the attitudes you want in all employees.
- Individual report: helps employees improve and deliver their skills through a sense of awareness.

It's all right for companies to believe they are lucky when they find employees who excel at customer service. But the Customer Service Profile™ can help create an atmosphere in which customer service is part of everyone's job.

Partner Contact Information