

The Six Customer Service Silver Bullets

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Here are the six elements that can position your organization for customer service success. Although be forewarned: excellence in customer service and the customer experience isn't a puzzle or riddle that can be solved once and for all. It's going to require sustained diligence and focus, because inertia and pushback will otherwise inevitably set in. But here are the six best ways to get started.

1. Build a simple customer service statement of philosophy. I'm not talking about a philosophical statement that's wordy and long, and destined for a dusty file cabinet. I'm talking about something short, memorable, and believable. The Mayo Clinic's "The needs of the customer come first" is one of the best ever written. It's seven words, every word is in English (as opposed to jargon and consultant-ese), and only one of those words is longer than a syllable. Because of the power of this approach, everybody at Mayo is able to learn this short, memorable credo from their first day of orientation—and to never forget it, as long as they're employed.

2. Hire employees who possess the essential customer service traits. You can't build a great customer service organization without the right people. These "right people" aren't necessarily the ones who arrive at your organization with all of their technical skills and knowledge already in place; rather, they're the ones with the essential personality traits that will allow them to ultimately succeed in doing a great job face-to face, or terminal to terminal, with customers—not to mention, being able to enjoy their responsibilities and tasks along the way

Here's my list of the essential customer service /customer-facing/customer-centric traits. Since my list spells "WETCO," I urge you not to reject out of hand my goofy (but effective) mnemonic device for remembering it: Think about a wet dog outside of PETCO and you'll never forget these key traits.

Warmth: Simple human kindness.

Empathy: The ability to sense what another person is feeling.

Teamwork: An inclination toward "Let's work together to make this happen" and against "I'd rather do it all myself."

Conscientiousness: Detail orientation, including an ability and willingness to follow through to completion.

Optimism: The ability to bounce back and to not internalize challenges.



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3. Strive to build an organization where “positive peer pressure” reigns supreme. Why do you think people are so nice at particular companies—opening doors for you, helping you when your car slides into a ditch (thank you, UPS driver on Bainbridge Island last weekend!), being creative in assisting customers—and even non-customers—no matter what comes up? A lot of this is because other people are also nice at that same company. Although this is dependent on hiring the right people, it will ultimately mushroom from the effect of having a lot of “right people” in the same room who can see each other acting in the right way and pushing themselves to deliver more of the same. Also, even though managers and leadership may not be exactly “peers,” what they do is at least as crucial; kindness to customers not only starts at the top, it can be stopped by those at the top as well. If they’re guilty of not walking the customer service walk, everybody in the organization is going to ultimately notice and stop trying either.

3. Set up a program of reinforcement for customer service best practices. I suggest daily reinforcement, or, if daily doesn’t fit into your company setup, then as often as possible. One single, big, annual event simply isn’t enough to keep the customer service spirit alive. (Don’t

misunderstand me here; I love being hired to be the keynote speaker at annual customer service-themed events, and I think a special push, a special time of focus, can have a lot of value. But also absolutely essential is more frequent reinforcement. Ideally, you should be having a huddle-style meeting at the beginning of every shift, where you talk only about customer service: principles, practicalities, victories, and failures. It should only take 10 minutes, but it can make all the difference in the world.

4. Benchmark the best customer service practices that you find in every industry, not just your own. It's not good enough to only benchmark your competition, because your customers judge your quality and speed of service based on the best service-oriented companies out there in every field. Simple example: maybe none of the competitors in your industry offer overnight shipping yet. But your customers still are coming to expect that option, because Amazon has set the standard here.

5. Give your customer service employees input into the design of their work. It's hard work providing customer service. It's deadening and inhumane work if every single aspect of providing customer service was designed at a central office without employee input feedback; for one thing, the people who best know how to do this work are often those who do it, day in and day out. (Having said that, this doesn't mean you should be "winging it." There is a lot of precision and a lot of corporate knowledge that can be brought to bear on the task as well, which brings me to point #6.)

6. Develop and refine your customer service standards and systems. As a customer service consultant, I sometimes run into people who are convinced that giving better customer service is, in essence, dependent on learning to "smile harder." I kid you not; I hear variations of this theme all the time: "Customer service is simple: just be nice." I take emphatic issue with this. Customer service not only isn't simple, it's not just about individual employees trying to be nice, without the support of appropriate resources, systems, processes, and standards. In other words, while it is essential to hire nice people and to support them in that niceness, the whole thing falls apart pretty quickly without the kind of standards and systems that can help a good employee to get the customer what they want, time after time, on the schedule they need, and without dropping the ball along the way.

*Micah Solomon^[2], recently named the "new guru of customer service excellence" by the Financial Post, is a customer service consultant, customer experience consultant, keynote speaker, trainer, and bestselling author. Click for two free chapters^[3] from Micah's latest book, *The Heart of Hospitality* or watch Micah's new customer service keynote speaker video^[4].*

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