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**10348 – Identify and Respond to Customer Needs in a Contact Centre**

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# Section Two: US 10348 – Identify and Respond to Customer Needs in a Contact Centre



# Learning Outcomes

On completion of this section, you will be able to:

* Identify customer needs in a Contact Centre through appropriate questioning and listening techniques;
* Demonstrate a correct understanding of customers' needs by applying industry special responses;
* Follow company specific prompts and procedures consistently;
* Respond to customer needs in a Contact Centre according to company specific requirements (Accurately defines the correct choice of action to be taken);
* Respond to customer needs in accordance with company specific time limits and Service Level Agreements; and
* Confirm accuracy by the customer.

In **Unit Standard 13885** we learnt how to **identify customer needs** and to provide relevant information to customers. We now need to look at how we **respond to our**

**customer’s needs**.

# 2.1 Identifying and Responding to Customer Needs

The best way to become a preferred supplier is to build a high level of goodwill, so that customers think of you first. A reputation for customer service, built on trust and dedication, ensures that present customers will continue to buy from you well into the future.

Keeping customers takes just as much effort as getting them in the first place. To keep customers, you need to handle their queries and complaints promptly. In this way you can show them that you care about them. The speed with which you handle their queries or complaints is seen to be in direct proportion to the value you place on them and their business.

There are key reasons as to why we deal with customers. It is important to identify the needs of the customer before you can effectively assist them. The basic customer needs include:

* Simple request for information
* A dissatisfied customer wanting a problem to be solved
* Requesting feedback or follow up on an issue
* Requiring a service or a product
* Reassurance from the company

Can you think of any other needs of customers? When completing this exercise, think of both your internal and external customers.

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**By identifying the basic customer need, it is easier to give the customer what they want and you will be in a better position to apply the appropriate skill to help them**.

When trying to identify what exactly a customer’s wants and needs are, we need to consider the following:

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| **Customer Needs** | | **Customer Wants** | |
| **Personal**  **Characteristics:** | **Physical**  **Characteristics:** | **Individual:** | **Environmental:** |
| **Genetics**  Customers from different backgrounds have different preferences, based on their genetic makeup. | **Climate** The weather conditions, altitude etc. affect customer’s needs for basic food, clothing and shelter. | **Personal**  **Worth**  This refers to the financial resources (income, borrowing power etc.) of a person – what they will & can afford. | **Public wants** Policy, government regulations have an influence on human and customer behaviours. |
| **Biogenetics**    Biological characteristics such as race, gender, and year of birth create obvious differences in needs for men and women. | **Physical location** A geographic area can generate certain needs relevant to the specific terrain, e.g., people living in mountainous areas have different needs to those that reside on the coast. | **Cultural context** Culture shapes everything we do or become. A customer’s culture influences their goals and wants. | **Economic conditions** The economic level of a country  (Unemployment  rate, inflation rates etc.) have an influence on business as well as personal customer’s wants. |
| **Psychogenic**    A person’s mood, emotions and perceptions can influence their preferences and needs. | **Ecology**    This includes the quality of air, ozone layer and food chain, which can affect customers’ activity levels and need for medications. | **Institutional context** This dimension refers to groups (peers, family etc.) and organisations (the workplace, university) a customer belongs to that can prescribe certain wants, i.e. uniforms for work etc. | **Technology**    With the advancement of the electronic age - the Internet - customers can receive inexpensive and efficient service of their needs & wants. |

Customers are everywhere – outside and within your organisation. You should be able to identify who your customers are, to know what they need and how you can effectively provide it for them. Once you have identified your customers, talk to them about what they do and don’t like about the service you provide for them. Use their feedback to improve the quality of work you do and deliver.

As a Contact Centre agent and someone who provides customer service, being able to assess your different customer personality types is an extremely important skill to have and one that you can learn.

If you can do this successfully you will:

establish relationships with your callers

Build customer loyalty thereby retaining customers

Achieve more profit

Know you are being truly professional

Have more fun knowing you can handle any customer type

Experiment with this skill

Feel good about your capabilities as a ‘people handler’

Get more job satisfaction

Achieve Win – Win – Win

When dealing with people in a customer service environment you should consider the information you have on your customer type and use it to decide how best to work with them to reach a ‘win- win’ situation. It is helpful to use the following as a guide.

**1) What does this customer type want?**  To make a purchase they will be satisfied with

To enjoy the encounter with you

To believe they have been served by an expert

To know they have used your knowledge to make a correct decision

### 2) How might you reflect their style so that they see you as ‘like them’

Be casual and chatty back

Use examples to explain things

Slow down to their speed

Say ‘Sir’ or ‘Madam’ more often

Point to user leaflets, details of the guarantee, explanations on the package about safety

**3) What might you say to reflect their style?**

Yes, a customer yesterday found exactly the same thing, and what I told her was…. (using an example)

I see Sir. Let me check that I understand correctly: You need to / want etc. (repeat their words so that they know you have been paying attention to what they have been saying)

Don’t worry. It’s no trouble at all. I’m pleased to be able to help you (we’re on the same team)

Yes, I see. Let me show you that in detail (I can prove it to you)

Once you have determined the type of customer you are dealing with, you can adapt your behaviour and conversational style to match theirs. Having done this, you will be far more likely to provide them with the service they expect.

The customer will come back to you time and time again as they feel you have understood their needs, they can trust you and you have developed a good rapport with them.

# 2.2 Customer Service Principles

Good customer care is important because it is what makes your company stand out from others. If a customer receives the same service at the same price from a number of different suppliers, the one more likely to obtain the customer’s repeat business is the supplier providing the best service.

Customers don’t just buy a product or service, they also buy the many aspects which are indefinable, such as professionalism, helpfulness, responsiveness, friendliness, empathy and good communication skills. Remember when you deal with a customer, you represent the entire company, its people, product and service.

Customers are not always right and at times they can be very rude and trying. However, the customer is always “king”, even when he is wrong!

The following are 10 of the most important customer service principles:

(You will notice that they start with the customer and include an emphasis on the employees of your organisation)

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| **1. Focus**  The customer should always be the number one focus of any company. All decisions, services, and products should be based upon satisfying the needs and expectations of the customers. | |
| **2. Establish Relationships**  Customer loyalty is achieved by having a relationship with your customers. The stronger the relationship, the more loyal your customer becomes. Relationships are built upon trust, communication, and interaction. Every customer interaction is an opportunity to further enhance communication and improve trust. | |
| **3. Belief**  The management of your organisation and every staff member need to believe in the power of customer service and the necessity of customer retention. Everyone needs to know that there is a close correlation between customer loyalty and the growth of a business and believe that becoming customer-focused not only makes good business sense but also guarantees increased revenue and profit. It has been said,” A belief is not merely an idea possessed by the mind; it is an idea that possesses the mind.” Everyone in the contact centre needs to be passionately obsessed with superior customer service. | |
| **4. Commit to Excellence**  Customer service is the number one differentiator in today’s competitive marketplace. Having a good product or a low price does not guarantee a competitive advantage or customer loyalty anymore. Commit to a customer-first culture within your company. Remember, serving with excellence is a choice that everyone in the company needs to make. | |
| **5. Formulate a Plan**  Is the care your customers receive by design or by default? Without clear, well defined customer service standards, customer satisfaction is left to chance or the whims of the employees and management. “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail”. | |
| **6. Take Action**  The best laid plans will never succeed, unless someone puts them into practice. When companies, which boast about the importance of customer service, fail to deliver outstanding service, customers and employees lose faith and trust in them. | |
| **7. Create Happy Employees**  The employees’ beliefs, attitudes and behaviours determine the quality of the customer service provided. The quality of customer service will never exceed the quality of the people who provide it. Happy employees create happy customers. | |
| **8. Build Team Unity**  To achieve optimal success everyone must be on the same page, striving for the same goal, aspiring to the same vision, and functioning as a team. Teamwork will always produce greater results than individuals working alone. | |
| **9. Develop Employees**  The key to employee development is training. Employees must be taught how to serve the customer and empowered to serve with excellence. | |
| **10. Measure Performance**  “If you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it”. Measuring customer satisfaction, customer feedback, and employee adherence to customer service standards is paramount in delivering exceptional customer service with any degree of consistency. “Inspect what you expect”. | |

# 2.4 Contact Centre Telephone Methods and Techniques

When asked what made a good call, customers answered as follows:

* “I wasn’t kept waiting”
* “The agent was very competent and knew her stuff! “
* “I was listened to without any interruptions! “
* “The agent was pleased to talk to me and seemed genuinely keen to help!”
* “The agent used a clear tone and understandable language – no jargon”
* “My request was completed when they said it would be – no need to call back”.

How do you structure and handle your calls so that your customers also give such good feedback?

If you break down a typical call, then you will see a series of steps. You will be trained on how to be the most effective in each of these steps and to provide the required company response.

It is not always easy, as the question or content changes all the time.

**Structure of a call:**

* **Call Opening**: the opening of the call is crucial as this often sets the scene for the whole call. The initial greeting is the Company brand, so it should be consistent across all agents and give the Company identity and voice! As an agent you will be expected to give this company greeting
* **Identification**: who is your customer (legal and company requirements)
* **Customer requirements**: why are they calling and what do they want you to do?
* **Clarification**: ensure you know fully what it is the customer needs, as this may not always be clear.
* **Action/respond**: completion of the request or provision of information or explanation as to why not able to do so.
* **Summarise** steps or actions that will be taken so the customer is clear on what you will do!
* **Offer**: anything else where assistance can be provided?
* **Close**: This is very important; thank the customer for calling and say goodbye politely!

**Techniques:**

* **Knowledge**: In most centres, agents will be trained on the most commonly asked customer questions. Ensuring an agent knows the answer to and how to process the information on the computer as efficiently as s/he can, will ensure that the call interaction is the best it can be.
* **Kept promises**: It is critical to an organisation’s reputation that the agent does what s/he promises to do and that the promise is in line with company policy and meets the needs of the customer. This is what constitutes an effective call.
* **No rash promises**: Promising to do something that the agent is not able to do, or to give a discount that the customer is not eligible for, just to complete a call, will not be acceptable to the company and will also lead to dissatisfied customers.

# 2.5 Identify Customer Needs in a Contact Centre

When an agent can recognise a customer's basic needs, and then exceed the customer's expectations, he or she will be able to provide good customer service. The basic needs we all share as customers are:

* The need to feel important or significant;
* The need for self-worth; and
* The need for security, to trust the agent and the organisation.

Good customer service is a combination of the following:

* It must be easy for the customer to do business with the company. The company's business processes and technology must be logical and accessible. There should be no or few delays, interruptions or errors.
* It must be a good experience for the customer to do business with the company. The customer must find the company accessible, available, reliable, responsive, understanding, empathetic, competent and trustworthy.
* The company must go the extra mile; do the unexpected extra thing for the customer. These gestures may seem small and irrelevant, but they can make a big difference to the customer's experience. Examples include leaving a chocolate on a guest's hotel room pillow, or asking questions such as, 'May we gift wrap this for you free of charge?'

## Having the Right Mindset

We might want to behave in a positive way but is this actually shown in our attitudes towards our customers/callers?

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One of the main ingredients of good customer care is a positive attitude. Attitude is difficult to define or describe. However, our appearance, non-verbal communication and speech give an indication of our attitude. When you see or hear yourself communicating, pay attention to the attitude you think you are projecting to your caller.



**Attitude**



**Behaviour**



**Customer**

**Perception of**

**Contact Centre**



**Self Perception**

**of Contact**

**Centre Agent**

Customers who are always satisfied will continue to do business with the company, and will prefer to do business with the company. Over time, this preference will become loyalty. Eventually, loyal customers become advocates of a business. This means that they promote the business by recommending it to others and spontaneously referring customers to the business.

#### Customer Satisfaction Model



One of the most important aspects of customer service is establishing what your customers' needs are. You need to know what your customer requires, so you can help him/her in the most efficient and effective way possible.

Customers generally have the following basic needs that must be met. These include:

1. Friendliness
2. Understanding and empathy
3. Fairness
4. Options and Alternatives
5. Information

How do you ensure that the needs of the customer are being met?

Firstly, you must identify the gaps and barriers that could be keeping you from meeting specific needs.

Lack of product knowledge, outdated policies, or faulty or misleading communications could be standing in the way of maintaining a customer-focused approach.

You can identify gaps and barriers by talking directly to existing customers, or surveying former and potential customers.

Research has resulted in the development of the **RATER** principle to address customer needs:

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| **R**eliability | Negotiating, offering, then ensuring products/services do what is promised, accurately, and dependably |
| **A**ssurance | Confidence that any help and support required will be provided |
| **T**angibles | Things that people judge you on - how quickly the call is picked up, is the customer helped and directed correctly, etc. |
| **E**mpathy | Respect and caring. Putting yourself in the customer's shoes. |
| **R**esponsiveness | Your willingness to efficiently respond to issues and/or concerns |

# 2.6 Instilling Trust in Your Customers

By respecting your callers and projecting an image of competence, professionalism and knowledge, your callers will immediately feel that you have the ability to assist them. As a result of this, you will establish credibility with your customers and they, in turn, will trust and respect your capabilities and decisions.



**“Everyone has the power of greatness. Not for fame but greatness.**

**Because greatness is determined by service.”**

**Dr. Martin Luther King**

Once you can identify your customer and understand good customer service and the needs and expectations of your customer one needs to look at the different elements that assist in responding and creating a good conversational rapport with your customer.

# 2.7 The Power of Creating an Image and First Impressions

The image we project is an extremely important way of communicating. In your jobs, the individual images of all of you combine to create the way the public views your company. On the

job each of you is a walking, talking advertisement for the company.

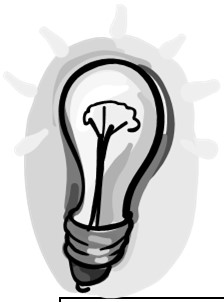
Image is very important to any business. In addition to advertising, businesses spend lots of money trying to create a good image. Some businesses have a uniform for their staff, e.g., South African Airways. The physical appearance of buildings and offices, inside and out is very important, including interior décor, neatness, flower arrangements etc.



Wesbank Building Johannesburg

Wesbank Interior

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Can you think of companies or organisations that spend a great deal of money and effort on branding themselves and enhancing the public’s perception of them?

It is all a part of projecting a positive image. However, the main image of a business does not come from any of those things, it comes from the people who make up the business. You are the ones the public thinks of when they think of your company as a whole.

At first, customers may be attracted by the positive image a company is projecting, i.e. new office premises, special offers etc. but they won’t return unless a quality service has been provided by you.

## First Impressions

“I make up my mind about people in the first ten seconds and I very rarely change it.”

**Margaret Thatcher, former Prime Minister of England**

How long do you think you have to make a first impression face-to-face?

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How long do you think you have to make a first impression over the telephone?

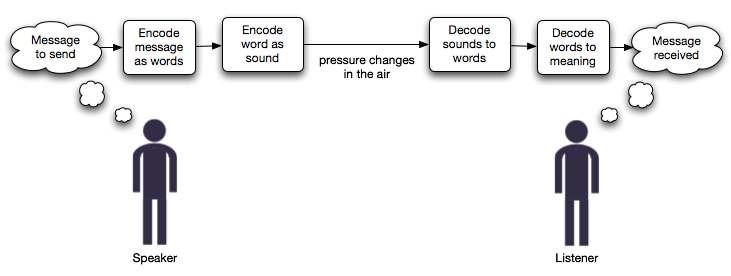
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It takes a few seconds to create a first impression and much longer to change or reverse that initial impression. Most of us cannot really understand how we come across to others, but it is easy to see how other people respond to us. When we communicate with warmth, friendliness, honesty, patience, tact and courtesy your callers respond in positive ways that you can hear and identify.

Identify your personal standards of excellence and stick to them. By setting standards for yourself and consistently sticking to them, it will reflect positively on you as an individual.

# 2.8 Communicating with Customers

## Communication Model



## Positive Conversational Attitude

* Be interested and interesting o Avoid a “here we go again” mind set and try to listen to each conversational partner in a fresh way. Also become aware of what interests’ others and ask questions accordingly. Be open – you never know - you might be surprised.

* Be friendly and have a sense of humour o Nothing kills conversation like criticism. Friendliness and humour on the other hand bring out the best in people. Teach yourself to see the humour in situations.

* Be tactful and empathetic o All people respond to warmth. If you treat people well you will benefit from interaction and achieve the results you want. Be sensitive towards your conversational partners’ feelings, beliefs and culture. Tactlessness offends and intimidates, so think before you speak.

* Be animated and enthusiastic o Use vitality, energy and enthusiasm. This does not mean that you have to adapt your style completely, just be as enthusiastic as possible within the realm of your communication style. Enthusiasm is a characteristic that all successful communicators have in common.

* Be flexible o Flexibility can be your biggest asset. The ability to flex and adapt to your conversational partner is a trademark of a good communicator. Start by evaluating your own communication style and become aware of other communication styles as well. How can you adapt your communication style to include your conversational partner?

## Negative Conversational Attitude

**Don’t be dogmatic** o Keep an open mind and avoid generalisations. When you have to make a point, be diplomatic (refer to the chapter on language usage). Also, remember that it is rude to monopolise a conversation – it doesn’t matter how strongly you feel about the topic.

**Don’t be argumentative** o Never argue just for the sake of arguing. Rather save your argument for a valid discussion. If you have to disagree do so in a diplomatic, amiable way.

#### Don’t mumble and don’t be long-winded

o Focus on the clarity of your speech. If you mumble, listeners will be preoccupied with figuring out what you are trying to say and the content will have no real impact. It is also important to remember that conciseness is an art. A few well-chosen words can have more impact than a long lecture.

**Don’t be insincere** o If you say you are going to do something, do it, or you may never be trusted. Take responsibility for what you say because without trust, rapport will never be established.

#### Don’t act superior

o Even if you are very confident in a situation, avoid acting superior. Communication is a two-way process and the best speakers are often the best listeners as well.

## Body Language & Non-Verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication refers to messages sent through human actions and behaviours, rather than through words. Although we are not usually aware of our non-verbal communication, it contributes significantly to the message we are trying to convey.

Your communication partner will get the “feeling” of what you mean, not so much from what you say but from your body language. Remember that what is appropriate or inappropriate non-verbal communication is decided the by individual and their culture. The following are some positive indicators of non-verbal communication:

⇒ Good eye contact (but be aware of cultural issues)

⇒ Open and relaxed – no folded arms or hand in front of the mouth, playing with fingers etc.

⇒ Answers fairly readily

⇒ Smiles easily

**ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS**

In order to improve your non-verbal communication, take note of the following:

#### Posture

Your body movement shows your energy levels and interest in what the customer is saying. You can tell when people are listening impatiently and want to end the conversation by some simple body language clues, such as:

* Leaning back or stepping away
* Turning their bodies away from you
* Pushing away from their desks
* Gathering up papers
* Closing their briefcases while you are still talking - Looking at their watches repeatedly.

Professional posture involves not slouching and sitting and standing straight and upright.

Good posture communicates that you are confident and in control of the situation.

#### Space and distance

Personal space is the distance that feels comfortable between you and the other person. We all define an area around ourselves, which we consider to be our personal space. People are extremely cautious about who they let into their personal space. Make sure that you read the space each customer has demarcated for themselves. As a good communicator you need to be aware of the space between you and your listener. Always make sure your listener is comfortable by not standing too close to them. You can quickly tell whether you have invaded somebody’s space – they usually step away from you.

By maintaining a safe, personal zone, you facilitate open communication, comfort and trust.

#### Eye movements and Eye Contact

Eye contact is one of the most powerful of all the body language skills. Appropriate eye contact lets the customer know you are interested, receptive and attentive to what they are saying.

The average length of time people maintain eye contact is 1.18 seconds. If your eye contact is shorter than this, people may think that you are disinterested, shy, preoccupied and untrustworthy. However, if your eye contact is too long, people will think that you are staring.

It is also important to remember that in some cultures, direct eye contact is considered rude, e.g. Japan, Korea and Thailand. When using eye contact, take your cue from the customer and make a judgment call about how comfortable they will be with western traditions of eye contact.

#### Gestures and Hand Movements

Relax movement of your arms and hands show the listener that you are confident and positive. Fists and pointing fingers can be seen as aggressive.

Remember that you don’t have to speak to give someone a strong message – they can see this through your body movements!

For example:

* Placing the cap on the pen and putting it in a pocket or taking off glasses and putting them into their case shows a readiness to end a conversation.
* tapping fingers shows impatience and frustration.
* repeatedly clicking a ball point pen or rattling loose change in a pocket usually means the person in uneasy, anxious or nervous.

#### Touching

The most acceptable form of touching is the handshake. Touching can be used to convey caring and concern, but be careful as touching can be misinterpreted, threatening or even offensive. You must always be sensitive to other people’s reactions. If you touch someone, even in a non-threatening manner, and they pull away or tense up, do not touch them again.

#### Facial Expression

Your facial expressions are like a mirror of your thoughts and feelings. They let everybody know whether you are feeling excited, happy, sad, bored, irritated or disbelieving.

Be careful not to show the stresses of the day on your face. Each customer is a new person and it should not be their concern that you have had a difficult day. People will trust you if the expression on your face matches what you are saying to them.



##### Verbal gestures

**Non-verbal** behaviour is a very important element of a conversation. It is not just words which carry meaning, but also the body language and appearance of the person speaking. When you are actively listening to someone who is sitting opposite you, you will tend to lean forward slightly. Leaning forward shows the other person that you are interested and concentrating on what they are saying. Often someone you are speaking to will use facial expressions and hand gestures to enhance what they are saying; this is another form of non-verbal behaviour.

Unfortunately, you can't see these non-verbal behaviours when speaking to someone over the phone. Instead you need to use **verbal gestures** which are gestures which can be

heard.

**Verbal encouragers** are verbal gestures which let the customer know that the agent is listening to her. The agent should say things like "yes", "mmm", or "I see" to let the customer know that s/he is listening to her.

The way you communicate with your customers and potential customers can have a huge impact on your organisation’s customer retention and growth. Customers want to feel comfortable when dealing with you and they need to be able to understand what you're telling them without having to resort to looking words up in a specialised dictionary.

Here are some tips to improve your customer communications:

##### Replace jargon or abbreviations with common phrases

An example might be the phrase “Before the MD approves the proposed QMS, the H&S rep needs to check whether it meets all SHEQ requirements, and only then can the VP OK it.” What a daunting concept. Even if it is translated afterwards, the use of jargon distances agent and client. It can be difficult to think in layman's terms, especially if all your reading and research is formal, but learn to translate technical terms into plain language. Big words won't impress your customers; they will only scare them.

##### Echo back your customers' words to them

A common customer complaint is that they are not being listened to. Think back to a time when you have tried to purchase an item from a shop and the assistant was distracted, perhaps talking to another assistant, or doing other work. It most likely made you feel unimportant to the business, which is not a good impression to be left with when you're in the process of handing your money over. Disinterest is often a misperception, but if you sound impatient or distracted when dealing with your customers, it gives the impression that you're inattentive. Repeat their questions back to them, both to enforce the impression that you are attentive and also to ensure that you truly understand the question. Start with, "What I hear you saying is XYZ. Is that right?"

##### Speak slowly and clearly

Make sure you are speaking slowly and clearly. Your level of comfort in dealing with your customers is displayed in the way you talk, so make sure you are projecting confidence and friendliness. If the language you do business in is not your mother tongue, it's even more important to make sure that your customers can understand you.

##### Give your customers context when explaining technical concepts

Some of your explanations to your customers might be very theoretical and could be difficult for customers to grasp. Enhance your explanations with examples and anecdotes. It will help solidify the discussion for your customers.

Communicating effectively with your customers is a skill that can be learned and improved upon by all agents and it can have a huge impact on your business’s bottom line.

# 2.9 Listening Techniques

What is the difference between listening and hearing?

“Remember you can’t learn anything when you are speaking.”

**Larry King**

There is a difference between hearing and listening. Everyone can hear unless they have a hearing impediment, but very few people are good listeners.

The good news is that good listening skills can be taught and learnt.

Listening to employees, co-workers and managers is important. Listening involves the skill of receiving the message accurately – it is the responsibility of the listener to make sure that the message is understood. The listener must therefore provide feedback to the speaker to ensure effective understanding. Many people do not listen effectively they concentrate on their reply rather on the message of the speaker. People are also prone to prejudice and tend to form an opinion of the speaker and his/her message based on other factors.

What is good listening? Good listeners are interested, listen to the whole message, work hard at listening and use summary and rephrasing to ensure that they receive the correct message. Effective or active listening can be learned, if you are a poor listener, it means that you have to break inappropriate habits and replace them with more effective ones. To become an effective listener, you must first identify your good and bad habits as this will show you which areas should be improved. Good listeners have a positive and open attitude towards their conversational partners. It is through effective listening that you can earn the respect of your customers as well as show that you truly care and understand about what they are saying. As contact centre agents the ability to listen is even more important than in many other lines of work. It is impossible to assist customers until you have worked out what it is that they need.

A good listener will remember the customer’s name and make reference to it and to each point he makes when repeating back to him what was heard.

When listening, you may unconsciously erect **barriers** which inhibit your listening. Avoid behaviour such as:

• **Rehearsing - going over in your mind what you will say next.**

If you are busy thinking about what you will say next, you won't be paying attention to what the customer is saying.

### • Interpreting what the customer is saying according to your own personal beliefs

You may not value the importance of something as much as others do, so you should not let your personal beliefs affect your treatment of the customer.

### • Daydreaming

If your mind is on other things, you won't be listening to what the customer is saying.

## The Barriers to Effective Listening

Make a list of the reasons why people don’t listen effectively.

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## How to Become a Better Listener

The elements of listening include:

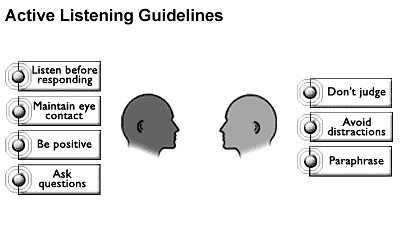
**Concentrate on listening to the speaker** - Filter out internal and external noise

**Be fully awake and aware** – this shows the caller your responsiveness and eagerness to help.

**Give the caller feedback to show you are listening –** say things like “yes, I understand”, “I see” or simply make a noise every so often so that the caller knows you haven’t disappeared and doesn’t have to say, “are you still there?” Encourage the speaker to talk by urging him/her on: ‘I see’ ‘Oh really?’ ‘That is interesting’ ‘I understand’.

**Paraphrase and ask the right questions** – this is important to ensure that you have understood your caller correctly and gives you the opportunity to obtain additional information.

**Listen with an open mind** – don’t judge the caller or assume you know what they want.



# 2.10 Positive vs. Negative Language

We've established the importance of positive communication in our interaction with customers, co-workers, and friends. Let us now explore the specific skills needed to speak positively.

### Turn Negative into Positive

It is important to use this positive approach in telephonic communication. By using positive language, you will be able to achieve greater professional success.

You need to express your ideas effectively. The words you choose can make or break your communication.

Let us examine some positive and negative responses. In the following tables fill in the positive responses: -

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Negative** | **Positive** |
| I will have to do it.    You will have to phone the broker directly    He has just popped out of the office | Certainly, I will do that for you!    May I ask the broker to contact you? He will be able to give you more information. He is out of the office at present. May I assist you or may he call you back on his return? |
| Change the following into Positive Statements | Alternatives |
| 1. I need to find the fax you sent through      1. I don’t know where the supervisor is      1. I’m afraid she’s in a meeting      1. I’m afraid I’ll have to find out and call you back.      1. That does seem to be a problem      1. I’ll try and do it. 2. I’ll try and transfer you. |  |

A caller asks you a question you are unable to answer. Write such a question and give a possible positive and negative response: -

**Question**

**Positive Response**

#### Negative Response

People prefer hearing what you can do and not what you can’t do.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Negative** | | **Positive** | |
|  | |  | |
| I can’t help you.      I can’t do that yet. | | Please may I have your details and I will phone you back with the information.    I haven’t tried that yet but I would love to learn. | |

**Accept Responsibility**

Positive talkers accept responsibility and take control of their own fate.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Negative** | **Positive** |
| You don’t understand.    I can’t help it; it’s not my fault.    I cut you off because there is something wrong with the phone. | I haven’t made myself clear.    It’s my responsibility to change things.    I am sorry for inconveniencing you. |

**Always give the positive first**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Negative** | **Positive** |
| I can’t help you but I’ll transfer your call to…    I don’t really have time but I suppose I can do it. |  |

# 2.11 Establishing Rapport

The Oxford dictionary defines the word “rapport” as: - a close relationship in which people understand each other very well. In other words, creating a win-win situation in which both conversational partners feel the same and respond positively.

Have you ever met someone and immediately felt that he/she is “with” you in every way? We have natural rapport with certain people. Good sales people often have the ability to create rapport with whom they communicate. This poses the question:

-

Do we communicate more effectively with listeners that share our goals and styles?

Is the ability to create rapport with listeners linked with personality? Can these skills be acquired?

The answer to all three questions is yes. We have better rapport with listeners with whom we can connect. It is linked to personality to a certain extent and depends on our sensitivity and exposure to people.

The next time you meet with someone try the following steps: -

|  |
| --- |
| **Step 1** ~ **Energy level** – become sensitive towards the general level of energy that your conversational partner uses. Is it high, fairly high, comfortable, relaxed or low? For example, try to subtly adjust your own level of energy to that of your conversational partner. |
| **Step 2** ~ **Breathing** – the way your conversational partner breathes will also tell you a lot. Is it shallow and fast (the way we breathe when we are nervous, upset, excited, stressed) or is it deep, slow and barely noticeable (the way we breathe when we are relaxed, comfortable etc.) Observe their breathing method and match it. |
| **Step 3** ~ **Pitch of voice and pace of speech** – breathing will also affect the pitch, volume and pace of your conversational partner’s speech. Adjust your voice and speech subtly to match theirs. |
| **Step 4** ~ **Physical posture and gestures** – this too will be affected. Match it closely but not exactly. For example, if your partner sits with his/her right leg over the left leg, or if he/she uses repeated gestures, match it. |

Use the four steps and try to match the “state” of your conversational partner. The method really works. It allows him/her to relax, to encourage trust and ultimately to create rapport. Over the telephone, the same method works very effectively. Remember that you will only have your voice, language, speech and attitude with which to create a rapport with your listener.

According to Geoffrey James[[1]](#footnote-1), building quick rapport on the telephone requires the ability to subtly reflect the prospect’s voice qualities (tonality, accent, word usage, rhythm, etc.) James says that you need three skills:

**The ability to hear and quickly assess the customer’s voice qualities**. During the greeting phase, don’t just listen to what the customer is saying, but to how the customer is saying it. Do the words come quickly or slowly? Is there a regional accent? What’s the level of intensity? Does the customer frequently use a certain word or phrase?

1. **The ability to change your voice ever so slightly to match**. As you speak, gradually take on the least obvious elements of the customer’s voice qualities.
2. **The ability to listen to a conversation while you’re actually in it.** This sounds simple, but it’s actually a specialised skill that’s the key to making this technique work. Most people, when they’re in a conversation, barely hear what the other person is saying; instead, they’re thinking about what they’re going to say next. Similarly, when they’re speaking, most people are thinking about **what** they’re saying, rather than **how** they’re saying it. Therefore, so many people have verbal tics, like sticking “uh…” in the middle of every thought and slapping a “you know…” at the end of every sentence. To build rapport, you need to be aware, not just of the content of the conversation but of

the way that the conversation sounds, so that you can bring your voice into alignment with the prospect’s voice. To do this, you segment out a portion of your consciousness so that you can “listen in” to the conversation as if it were a radio show, even when you’re speaking. This sounds difficult, but it’s actually quite easy.

Step 1: When the customer is speaking, listen carefully to what’s being said, but use about ten percent of your consciousness to listen to how it’s being said.

Step 2: When you’re about to speak, pause a little longer than you usually do, and formulate in greater detail than usual what you’re going to say. When you start speaking, your brain will remember what you planned to say, even if you’re not entirely paying attention to your words.

Step 3: While you’re speaking, use about ten percent of your conscious mind to listen to how you sound and match it, ever so slightly, to how the prospect sounded.

The key element is that extra pause in step 2, which gives you the “breathing space” you need to do step 3 correctly. It seems a bit awkward at first, but after a little practice, the technique quickly becomes automatic. When mastered, the ability to listen to the qualities of a conversation (as well as the content) allows you to constantly assess and adjust your voice qualities to subtly match the customer’s, thereby creating the foundation for rapport.

## Empathy

Empathy is:

“The capacity to know emotionally what another is experiencing from within the frame of reference of that other person, the capacity to sample the feelings of another or to put oneself in another’s shoes.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

From the definition we can see that an empathetic response meets four conditions:

1. An awareness of the state of being of another
2. An understanding of the condition
3. A personal identification with the situation
4. An appropriate, affective response.

Feeling empathy and showing it is an important skill when talking to customers. When you empathise with someone you are able to see things from their perspective. This will help you to better understand and make it easier to resolve any issues or problems that the customer may have.

When you show empathy for a customer you may say:

* "I understand that the delay in the delivery of your order is very frustrating." • "I can appreciate how you must be feeling."

When you empathise, customers feel that:

* their issue is important to you
* they are being listened to
* their point of view is valued
* you will try to resolve their issues or problems.

Your ability to empathise with your customers is very important when it comes to building a relationship with them. The customer will come back to your company with repeat business because of the high standard of customer service provided.

You can show empathy by:

* listening with your head as well as your heart
* agreeing with how the customer feels
* apologising without taking the blame
* sounding sincere.

# 2.12 Effective Questioning & Paraphrasing Techniques

It is important to plan key questions in order to provide structure and direction to the conversation. With experience, you already know more or less what a customer is going to ask (but of course you must never make the mistake of predicting the course of the conversation and stop listening!)

The ability to correctly determine what your caller needs as well as gather all the relevant information, can be achieved through asking the right questions. If you do not ask questions, you might find that the call lasts longer than it has to, you give the caller the incorrect information, misunderstandings occur and the result is an extremely dissatisfied customer.

Can you think of a time when you have experienced a situation similar to this where things went wrong as a result of not listening and not asking questions?

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There are two types of questioning techniques to use:

Closed Questions – **are used to control a call where the caller is talking too much and not giving the relevant information. By interrupting, you may be perceived as rude so the use of closed questions is very effective in this situation. Closed questions focus the conversation on the necessary information and details.**

Examples: “What is your receipt number?”

“Are you able to download your emails?”

“When did you make your last payment?”

‘As I understand it,… is that the problem, am I right?’

“Do you feel that you were treated unfairly?’

‘You feel unhappy about the situation?’

Open Questions – **are used to encourage the caller to provide lots of information and where the caller explains, describes or elaborates on the details. Open questions are often used most effectively at the beginning of a conversation and when the situation requires you to fully investigate the feelings of the caller and what specifically has occurred.**

Express understanding of the speaker’s feelings by echoing what you think the customer is feeling. Apart from checking your understanding of the caller’s message, the caller gets the opportunity to see his/her feelings more objectively. By being understood, the speaker feels accepted and will feel free to go into more details.

Examples: “How may I be of assistance to you?”

“Please describe to me what you experienced?”

“Can you explain to me what happened when…”

‘Could you elaborate on that?’

‘What do you mean by that, could you be more specific?’

“Do you mean that…?’

### Paraphrasing Techniques

Paraphrasing is important towards the end of a conversation as it shows the listener that you are involved in the conversation and concerned with understanding what is being said. By restating you and the caller are in total agreement with each other and agree on the facts and course of action to be taken.

Make sure you do not echo (repeat word for word) what the caller has said, rather summarise it in your own words. Rephrase and summarise the main ideas and feelings, e.g. ‘To summarise, the main complaint is…’ ‘We’ve analysed the following factors... Is there anything else that you would like to mention?’ ‘In other words…’

Keys to active listening can be summarised as follows:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Keys** | | **Poor listener** | | **Good listener** | |
| Listen actively | | Is passive, laid back | | Ask questions, paraphrases what is said | |
| Find areas of interest | | Tunes out dry subjects | | Looks for opportunities, new learning | |
| Resist distractions | | Is easily distracted | | Fights or avoids distractions, tolerates bad habits, knows how to concentrate. | |
| **Keys** | | **Poor listener** | | **Good listener** | |
| Capitalise on the fact that thought is faster than speech | | Tends to day dream with slow speakers | | Challenges, anticipates, mentally summarises, weighs the evidence, listens between the lines to tone of voice | |
| Be responsive | | Is minimally involved | | Nods; shows interest, give and take, positive feedback | |
| Judge content, not delivery | | Tunes out if delivery is poor | | Judges content; skips over delivery errors | |
| Hold one’s fire | | He preconceptions, starts to argue | | Does not judge until comprehensive is complete | |
| Listens for ideas | | Listens for facts | | Listens to central themes | |
| Work at listening | | Shows no energy output; faked attention | | Works hard, exhibits active body state, eye-contact | |
| Exercise one’s mind | | Resists difficult material in favour of light, recreational material | | Uses heavier material as exercise for the mind | |

We establish customer needs through active listening, questioning, responding, empathising and establishing a relationship with the customer.

As you have seen, you are disadvantaged when talking over the telephone, because you can't see the person you are talking to. Therefore it's important that you make sure you understand what the customer is trying to tell you. One way of making sure is to use active listening techniques, for example:

* using verbal encouragers such as "mm", "of course", "yes" and "I see"
* asking questions directly related to what the customer is saying
* seeking clarification of anything you don't understand by asking the customer to explain or give more detail
* summarising or paraphrasing what the customer is saying
* encouraging the customer to provide more information.

See if you can identify all of these techniques in the conversation below:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Sam: | How can I help you, Natasha? |
| Natasha: | I bought a shower head from you today and when I turned it on just now, water was gushing from the sides! |
| Sam: | (During a quick pause) Right. |
| Natasha | But it stopped once I turned it off. |
| Sam: | I see. I’m sure it was very frustrating. It probably made quite a mess as well. |
| Natasha: | Yes, it did, actually. |
| Sam: | Was the shower head turning around at all? |
| Natasha: | No, it wasn’t turning at all. |

Sam: So water is coming out the sides and the shower head is firmly fixed. Is this correct?

# 2.13 Products and Services in your Industry

It is important that you have a good understanding of the products and services offered by your organisation and in your industry.

Every organisation has a code of conduct for sales agents, which provides guidelines on behaviour when dealing with customers. All agents are expected to familiarise themselves with and adhere to these guidelines.

Generally, an agent is expected to:

* promote products and services that are appropriate to a customer's need or request
* explain the condition, price, and delivery arrangements fully to a customer
* maintain privacy of customer information
* maintain the integrity of the organisation’s customer data by updating customer records where appropriate
* behave in a professional and courteous manner at all times.

Ethics are very important in sales - even more so if you are not dealing face to face with your customers. The way you treat the customer, builds an image in the customer's mind about your organisation.

It is important that you follow the sales principles, because if you don't:

* Customers:

o may feel that they are being pushed into a sale o could be worried about the security of their personal information o may not return to the organisation because of a bad experience o will tell other people about their bad experience

* you cannot be sure of the process that another agent has used
* orders may not be placed correctly in the order system
* delivery may be delayed because of missing information
* you may receive more angry calls from customers due to the above factors.

**Do not:**

* provide a product or service without the customer's consent
* fail to update records to reflect a transaction
* knowingly omit to inform a customer of requirements for use of a product or service • comment on a staff member's or competitor’s behaviour

You must **advise the customer** of the:

* price
* delivery or installation requirements
* lead time required for provisioning
* any eligibility requirements
* instructions for use.

Make sure that you have all information regarding the customer's enquiry.

Check the organisation’s systems and records to gain additional information regarding their order.

If you need to discuss the issue with another agent or your team leader, arrange a specific call-back time with the customer.

Ensure that you have a contact name and current number for the customer.

Make sure that you keep commitments that you make. Even if you can only report that their query is still being investigated, keep your commitment.

In case of a dispute, some options that you can offer your customers to help resolve the matter are usually:

* additional discounts
* refunds of charges • free delivery arrangements
* bonus products or offers.

All of these must be approved by the team leader.

## Sources of information

Agents must ensure that they have, or know where to find, all product information.

An agent's primary source of information is:

* The organisation’s database, such as a computerised system used to store and look up customer and product information

Additional information can be sourced from other documents, for example:

* marketing campaign guides and information
* special offers
* user manuals
* fact sheets.

Other valuable sources of information are your team leader, supervisor and your colleagues.

# 2.14 Contact Centre Procedures, Guidelines and Policies

It is very important that call guidelines are followed in accordance with the organisation’s Policy, for example:

## Conducting a call

1. Greet and listen
2. Acknowledge and identify
3. Verify
4. Confirm
5. Close

When closing an inbound call with a customer you need to:

* + Summarise the call.
  + Check that the customer is satisfied.
  + Offer further assistance.
  + End the call using standard phrasing

## Complaints about staff

If you receive a complaint about another staff member you should attempt to gain as much information as possible from the customer about the situation and then refer the call to your team leader or other designated person.

## Credit checks

* **Account types**

Sometimes the organisation has accounts with valued customers. Following satisfactory credit checks, customers are extended credit for payment within a specified number of days.

* **Credit limits**

Every customer must have a complete credit check conducted before an account is opened. Always ask the customer whether they are applying on behalf of a company or are applying as an individual and then conduct individual or company credit checks according to the company’s procedures.

Read your company’s policy and procedures documents for more specific information about what is required of you as a contact centre agent.

**Complaints management policy**

* All complaints are important and are taken seriously.
* Every complaint is feedback and an opportunity to improve our business practices.
* We try our best to solve the complaint at the first customer contact point.
* We try to maintain a positive attitude, while finding a solution that will satisfy the customer.

**Complaint escalation**

You should always try to resolve a complaint at the first contact with the customer. Sometimes, however, the complaint cannot be resolved at your level.

You should escalate a complaint when:

* a solution to the complaint is outside your delegation.
* a customer is complaining about a price, product or policy and is not satisfied with your response. They are persistent and will not accept your offer of a solution.
* a customer is not happy with your response and asks to speak to someone in authority.
* a customer is extremely upset, or abusive.
* a customer wishes to complain about another staff member. They may be complaining about the way they were spoken to, or how the staff member handled their enquiry.

## Occupational health and safety

When you put on your headset, you should always make sure that it is adjusted to suit your own needs.

Headsets include a noise-cancelling microphone and a padded earpiece which allow you to hear your customer clearly.

The noise-cancelling feature means that you can have your amplifier on a lower volume setting. You should always check that your volume setting is no more than 6. (If the volume is set too high and you receive a call that is very loud, you may hurt your ear.) Sometimes you have to turn up the volume for a particular call - remember to turn it back down before taking your next call.

You should clean your headset regularly. Use hygienic wipes to help prevent infections.

If you find that you cannot hear the customer properly, or your headset is making strange or crackling noises, let your supervisor know immediately. The problem may be fixed by something as simple as changing the battery in your headset. Your supervisor will check that your equipment is safe and will try to fix the problem.

Excessive static over the phone can indicate a technical problem that may lead to an acoustic incident. An acoustic incident is an unexpected noise that comes through your headset. This can be a high-pitched noise or squeal. Acoustic incidents are not very common, as telecommunications technology is sufficiently advanced to prevent unexpected noise from coming through to agents.

**Privacy policy**

* All client information is confidential and remains the property of the organisation.
* Staff must take adequate steps to ensure that client information is not divulged to anyone outside the organisation.
* When taking calls from clients, as a minimum requirement, it is essential that agents verify the customer’s account number, customer’s name, the credit card details and the delivery address.
* Failure to adhere to the organisation’s privacy procedures may result in instant dismissal and/or civil charges in accordance with the confidentiality agreement signed by all staff on commencement.

# 2.15 Work within Company Specific Timeframes

Customers' needs must be identified within your company’s specific timeframes and according to specific procedures, without giving the impression that you are impatient or hurrying the customer along because there are a number of other callers waiting. Let’s hope you are never in this agent’s position:

Consider what happened during the airplane hijackings in the United States on 11 September 2001:

Todd Beamer, a passenger on the hijacked United Airlines Flight 93, knew that he was going to die. So, he tried to call his wife from the plane. However, he had a problem with his credit card and was connected to GTE Air phone operator Lisa Jefferson.

According to news reports, Beamer and Jefferson spoke for 13 minutes, during which time Jefferson took details of the hijackers, consoled Beamer, and promised to call his wife. Finally, she prayed with him before the air phone connection was terminated. Later she called Beamer's wife to relay her husband's heroic final moments and message.

Flight 93 eventually crashed into a field in western Pennsylvania, leaving no survivors after the passengers charged the hijackers.

How was Jefferson able to keep herself together during those harrowing 13 minutes? What kind of customer service training could have prepared her for a situation like that?

# 2.16 Follow Prompts and Procedures

Your company specific prompts and procedures should be familiar to you and followed at all times.

The following are some best practice guidelines[[3]](#footnote-3) for using an IVR (InteractiveVoiceResponse) system in a contact centre:

**Best Practice #1: Make the system as easy to use and familiar as possible.**

* Emulate familiar methods and procedures.
* Keep prompts short and to the point.
* Permit prompts to be overridden, wherever possible.
* Limit the number of choices to a maximum of five options per menu. Giving callers more than four or five choices makes it difficult for them to remember all available options and can be tedious. Carefully examine your calling audience about this issue: feedback may tell you that you will only want to offer up to three choices at a given level.
* Provide callers with feedback and verification of their actions.
* Position the most commonly requested choices first on your menu.
* Callers should go down no more than 5-7 steps to complete their transaction.
* Use a voice that reflects your corporate image and that is pleasing to callers (consider holding focus groups to evaluate voice talent).

**Best practice #2: Let callers feel in control.**

* Blame mistakes on the system, not on your callers.
* Give callers an easy way to go back to the main menu and all submenus.
* Allow callers to repeat, pause and move forward and backwards as appropriate.
* Automatically repeat each prompt at least once if no action is taken.
* Always provide a way for callers to reach a live answer point by pressing 0 during business hours.
* Give additional guidance for complex or high-value transactions.
* Offer a demonstration option or tutorial showing how the system works.
* Don't confuse callers by changing the application frequently. In general, changes to call flow and logic should not be made more than once every six months, and unless there are compelling reasons, the Main Menu should almost never be changed.

**Best Practice #3: Keep the user interface consistent.**

* Phrase each activity in the same manner.
* State the action before the action key.
* Use keypad functions in a consistent fashion.
* Handle invalid entries and timeouts the same way at each menu level.
* Voice quality, including pitch and volume, should be consistent throughout the application.
* Use a single voice throughout the application: multiple voices tend to be jarring to callers.
* Don't look at your voice response system in a vacuum. IVR applications should complement Internet applications, customer materials, screens used by customer service reps, etc. as part of the whole customer contact experience. This means using consistent phrasing, terminology, and content availability.

**Best Practice #4: Provide a number of ways into and out of the system.**

* Always provide a way for callers to get to a live answer point, while at the same time encouraging them to use the application.
* Train customer support staff on the system - and keep them informed of changes and updates.

**Best practice #5: Talk to callers - don't write to them.**

* We speak very differently than we write. Scripts that sound like writing are stilted and frequently discourage callers.
* Always read your script aloud before it is recorded and test it with a mix of people.
* Use a natural, high quality, intelligible voice.
* Time prompts and options must reflect normal conversation.
* Avoid using acronyms or technical jargon that your average caller may not understand.

**Best Practice #6: Use technology to personalise your callers' experience.**

* Identify callers through account numbers or other methods in order to offer options that are tailored to the caller, and/or the caller's value to your organisation.
* Provide dynamic menus, wherever possible, that are tailored to the services available to the caller.
* Don't offer callers options that are not available to them under their specific service level.
* If callers transfer out, provide the answering point with information about the caller and where the caller was in the system.

Remember:

A key element in any successful voice response application is giving callers choice and control. Typically, we find that systems that are in trouble become so because they force callers to use them - either by using IVR to answer all calls, or not telling callers how to exit the system, or by offering choices that don't adequately describe what the caller is looking for.

# 2.17 Responding to Customer Needs in a Contact Centre

We have seen that managing customer expectations is important to your business; in fact, in today’s competitive environment, exceeding expectations is critical to building customer loyalty and retaining customers.

We must remember that many customers only experience a brand when they interact with a contact centre agent.

This over-the-phone customer interaction presents an opportunity for positive interaction that builds loyalty, but if our customers’ expectations are not carefully managed, it can be damaging to the brand.

### Customer queries

A query is any enquiry into something. It is a request for information. Therefore “customer queries” are customers making enquiries about something they want to know.

This should generally not have any negative connotations, but many staff members who deal with customers seem to find even the thought of customer enquiries threatening, or they are often seen as a “nuisance”. Therefore, agents often have a negative attitude towards having to answer customer queries, instead of seeing them as an opportunity to improve customer relations.

When you recognise and deal with customer queries you must consistently:

* Deal with queries and requests from customers in a positive and professional way
* Seek information or help from a colleague if you cannot answer your customer’s query or request
* Obtain help from a colleague if you are not able to deal with your customer’s request
* Tell your customer what is happening
* Recognise when something is a problem from the customer’s point of view
* Not say or do anything which may make the problem worse
* Deal with a difficult customer calmly and confidently
* Recognise when to pass a problem on to an appropriate colleague
* Pass the problem on to your colleague with the appropriate information
* Check that the customer knows what is happening
* Check that your colleague is dealing with the situation

Therefore, to be competent at recognising and dealing with customer queries you must know and understand:

* Who in the contact centre is able to give help and information
* The limits of what they are allowed to do
* What professional behaviour is
* How to speak to people who are dissatisfied
* How to deal with difficult people
* What customers normally expect
* How to recognise a problem from what a customer says or does
* What kinds of behaviours/actions would make situations worse
* The organisational procedures you must follow when you deal with problems or complaints

### Know your service/ product

Anticipate questions that might be asked by customers and have answers ready. Practice your answers several times. Taping and listening to it beforehand is also a good idea, as it allows you to assess how you sound. Check your facts and know your subject matter before you speak. Always be careful about how you express personal opinions.

### Refer issues that cannot be resolved

Customer issues that you will encounter in the course of your job include questions relating to products, issues with service delivery, complaints about defective products that “don’t work” and queries on various matters, ranging from information on available products to how to use the products or services.

Sometimes customers ask difficult questions to which you do not know the answer, or they request special treatment, such as circumventing the organisation’s procedures.

Sometimes you may be able to help customers yourself, but if you cannot, either due to lack of knowledge or due to restrictions placed upon you by policies, you certainly need to know whom to ask for help if necessary.

What does a customer with a complaint want from you and the organisation? The customer wants a speedy resolution. The customer wants whatever is broken to work again and whatever is missing to be replaced. What the customer does not want is to hear “excuses”, or, worse still, not to be told anything.

The customer does not know that you have Standard Operating Procedures to deal with issues. The customer does not understand that, when you say you cannot do something, it is because your hands are tied by company policy. Therefore, you need to patiently explain to the customer why a certain procedure is being followed.

**Escalation** is the process of moving a customer’s complaint up from one level of support, or discretion, to the next and will be determined by your company’s policies, Standard Operating Procedures and each employee’s level of authority.

How do you enhance the customer’s experience of your service while transactions are being escalated? It is really very simple, yet so few customer service representatives do it: Communicate! Tell the customer what you are doing, why you are doing it and when you will give feedback.

Of course, in spite of all your best efforts, you will not be able to satisfy every customer need.

At times you will encounter customer requests which fall outside your scope of authority. These are, of course, to be referred to the appropriate person in your company.

### Responding within Time Limits and Service Level Agreements

Read the following article regarding service delivery[[4]](#footnote-4):

Companies should have documented service level agreements for all their processes and procedures. Once these have been defined you will be able to define turnaround times for all interactions with your customers which will ultimately set your service standards. Each and every customer should be treated in the same manner irrespective of the size of the customer.

What most companies forget is that the small customers were their first customers. Look after all your customers equally. Customers must be treated with the highest levels of respect and courtesy. We are currently living in the information age and customers today require detailed information about a product or service that they wish to purchase. Ensure that all your brochures as well as your internet site has all the information about who you are and what it is you sell. Customers want to know who they are dealing with so it is important that you give some information about your company.

Processes and procedures should be in place to deal with customer complaints or service failures. The customer should have access to a platform where they can address their uses and feel confident that the issue at hand will be dealt with and that an apology is given to them personally.

Customers today are looking at value for money before making a purchase. Ensure that if you are selling a product or service that your after sales service is of the highest standards.

Companies often fall short in this area as their initial selling capabilities are very good however when a customer has a complaint or requires a product to be repaired, they experience poor levels of service from the after sales departments.

### Responding by Complying with Company Specific Requirements

To be competitive, all businesses must have outstanding customer service practices and policies. Your customers deserve a strong policy that guarantees they will be taken care of and employees need guidelines that they can follow to provide better service. Smart companies therefore have customer service policies in place to protect their best interests and the bottom line.

#### Customer-friendly policies

Nothing makes a customer angrier than someone saying, “I’m sorry, that’s our policy.” In many cases policies exist because “that’s the way we’ve always done it before.”

Take an inventory of your contact centre’s policies. Do they facilitate customer satisfaction or do they only erect barriers and cause customer frustration? If you’re having difficulty identifying these “unfriendly” policies, review your customer complaints and assessments. A quick review of the feedback is sure to direct you to some of these “unfriendly” policies. Of course, you know that you have some “unfriendly” necessary policies that your customers may not like, but that you are legally bound to have. You can’t do much about these except make them as “friendly” as possible.

Keep your “friendly” necessary policies and strengthen them even more if you can. Use customer friendly policies as a competitive edge and keep your customers coming back for more.

# 2.18 Confirming Accuracy with the Customer

Once you think you have a clear understanding of the customer’s needs, you need to confirm that your assumptions are correct. Remember, customer needs are the focal point of any sales interaction, but customers don’t always express their needs clearly. Many times they describe what we have called opportunities.

Opportunities differ from needs in that the customer's desire for a solution is either unclear or unknown.

To make sure that an opportunity is a need, you should question/probe to confirm the customer's desire for a solution. In other words, if you're unsure that the customer is

expressing a need, probe to confirm the need.

Open questions/probes are used to **gather more information** to clarify that there is a specific need.

Closed questions/probes are used to **confirm your understanding** of the need.

Remember to repeat the customer’s needs back to her to confirm that you have understood correctly.

Once you have ascertained the specific needs that the customer has, you now need to start offering product or services that will meet the needs, at all times remaining within your level of authority.

Salespeople often fall into the trap of making assumptions **when creating solutions for their customers**. During a conversation with a customer, they uncover a **similar situation or problem** that they have handled with a previous customer, so they assume that the same solution will fit this situation as well.

The problem arises when the salesperson fails to invest the time to go beyond the obvious and to explore the customer's **specific objectives or concerns**. The salesperson provides the customer with the benefits of service that the salesperson perceives to be important, without considering the customer's **particular needs**.

You need to be just as careful when analysing the need and offering a solution as when you were trying to establish the need.

The first skill you will need is the skill of **supporting**:

### When to support

You make a **support statement** when you have uncovered a customer need and you feel you have a clear understanding of the need.

Remember the better you understand the need, the more precisely you can satisfy it with an appropriate solution.

If a customer makes a vague or incomplete statement of opportunity, you should probe until you are sure you correctly understand the opportunity. The better you understand an opportunity, the more precisely you can satisfy it with a solution if it turns out to be a need.

Once you've confirmed that the need does exist, you can then support it with the appropriate solution.

When you support, you do two things:

1. Acknowledge the customer's need
2. Introduce the appropriate solution(s) that will satisfy the need

Below is an example of a good support statement

Customer: "What I want is someone who can tell me what kind of XYZ to use to get the clearest picture, as there seem to be so many on the market now."

Agent: "You're right. Correct selection of an XYZ can make all the difference in the world. Let me see what model I can recommend that will be perfect for your needs.”

In summary:

Maintaining a warm, friendly, open atmosphere with our customers is vital not only to the business but to yourselves. Since most of us spend a considerable amount of time on the job, makes good sense for us to make that time as pleasant and rewarding as possible. Positive interaction improves your work environment.

The most successful Contact Centres are those which spend a great deal of time trying to make their customers happy. Create the impression that you are there and willing to help. Operate on a good energy level, participate fully and be interested in the communication.

1. In the article *To Sell More, Listen to Your Voice*; retrieved from:

   http://www.selfgrowth.com/articles/The\_Top\_Ten\_Customer\_Service\_Principles.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. D. M. Berger (1987). Clinical Empathy. Northvale: Jason Aronson, Inc [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Retrieved from: http://www.call-center.net/ivr-series.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Article by Howard Badler, retrieved from: http://www.skillsportal.co.za/training/customer-service-training/706383.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-4)