

Defining Customer Service

Is customer service so purely subjective that it exists only in the eyes of the beholder? Or can the standards of good customer service be defined objectively and exist independently of individual customers and employees?

For many people, customers as well as employees, customer service is a lot like pornography. They can't necessarily define it clearly, but they sure know it when they see it. Or at best, they'll give you a platitude like "It's being treated like you want to be treated" which may very well be true, but how do you develop a training program to help employees become more effective dealing with customers if the definition of good service is so nebulous?

QUICK TIPS

Every encounter has some effect on the customer's perception of your business.

Neutral encounters are negative.

To make EVERY customer encounter a positive experience ask yourself:

"What can I do to exceed their expectations?"

"How can I let them know that we're thrilled to have their business?"

"How can I PERSONALLY make this encounter extraordinary and positive?"

Is it that Customer Service defies definition because it is so warm and fuzzy that it must be experienced rather than quantified? Is Customer Service so purely subjective that it exists only in the eyes of the beholder? Or can the standards of good customer service be defined objectively and exist independently of individual customers and employees?

Whatever the best definition of Customer Service might be, most people know it when they see it or experience it. Customer service, whether good or bad, exists whenever there is customer contact or a "moment of truth." We know it when we go into a retail establishment and can't get a product related question answered. We feel it at a restaurant when the staff's priority is with each other and not their customers. We sense it at a government bureaucrat's office when we can't get a straight answer to a simple question.

Those are good examples of what customer service is NOT. But how can you clearly define what it IS. Here is one definition that works for many successful businesses: *Customer Service is every encounter between a customer and a business that results in a negative or positive perception by a customer.* The perception will be either positive or negative (there is no neutral, because neutral is negative. More on this later) depending on whether the customer's expectations of the contact having been met, surpassed, or disappointed.

EVERY encounter.

What is meant by "every encounter between a customer and a business" in the above definition? Obviously when customers encounter employees directly with a request or a need, there is a customer service moment, but what about the other myriad encounters a customer may have with your business? When they see or hear an advertisement in the mass media. When they overhear two of your employees chatting in the mall's food court? When they read a story about your business in the press.



When an acquaintance mentions a recent experience at your business. These are all encounters that can effectively change the customer's perception of your business, so they all fall within our definition.

This may cause some concern for those who are used to thinking of customer service only in terms of face-to-face customer contact. But more and more businesses are anxious for any possible way to gain competitive advantage, and the most successful and forward-thinking are looking at EVERY customer encounter as a service opportunity. So when we say every encounter we mean literally EVERY encounter.

Neutral is negative.

"Every encounter... that results in a negative or positive perception by a customer." Sure, that makes sense. If the customer has an encounter that leaves them with a negative or positive perception, it's easy to see how that can affect your business. But what about those encounters that are neither? Encounters that barely make it onto the mental "radar screen" of the customer because they're essentially neutral. A restaurant serves a satisfactory meal at a fair price, with a polite wait staff. A clerk provides requested information. The "clearance sale" items ring up correctly at the cash register. These are all encounters that meet your expectations and don't alter your perception of the business in either a positive or negative way.

But when it comes to customer service, neutral IS negative. Because customers aren't experiencing your business in a vacuum. Every day they're having customer service "encounters" with many other businesses – some (many?) of whom want to lure them away from YOUR business. And these competitors know that a customer who has had a series of neutral encounters is ripe for the picking when they experience even a single, extraordinary, positive encounter.

So for the purposes of our definition we think of all customer encounters as being positive or negative, with neutral of course being negative. *Which means every customer encounter is a service opportunity.* And the goal is to make every encounter an experience that alters their perception of your business in a positive way. Admittedly that's a tall order – continuously exceeding expectations – but it's one of the few ways left to create and maintain competitive advantage.

Bringing the definition to life.

Managers and employees who truly understand the implications of this definition have a heightened awareness of the impact they make with every customer encounter. They realize that every face-to-face meeting, whether or not there is an actual request or transaction, is an opportunity to enhance the customer's perception. Every telephone call. Every letter. And often this awareness alone is enough to begin to make a difference, although training and reinforcement is usually necessary for permanent change to take hold.

The most immediate result is increased customer loyalty, which leads to greater profitability. But the benefits of bringing this definition to life within your organization reach far beyond the current customer. New customers are more likely to be drawn away from competitors. Employees are more likely to feel "connected" to customers and experience greater job satisfaction. And managers will spend less time putting out customer service "fires" and more time creating positive customer encounters themselves.

Competitors know that a customer who has had a series of neutral encounters with your business is ripe for the picking.

Again, this is a tall order for any business, but it's one of the few ways left to create and maintain an edge in today's highly competitive business world.