



THE NEW SCIENCE OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

There are basically two types of books about customer service: One type talks about how to be a nicer person, and the other presents stirring war stories about doing great things for customers. This book is neither of these.

This book looks at customer service in a way that most people have never looked at it before: as a science, based on known principles of behavioral psychology, that will help you become supremely confident in the way that you interact with people—even in difficult situations. When you master these skills—which is easier than you think—you gain a whole new set of powers that let you:

- Instantly connect with people from the moment you speak to them
- Discuss delicate situations with grace and tact
- Defuse angry people and turn them into allies
- Make people feel special and important
- Speak in each customer's own unique language
- Control the transaction and bring it to a smooth, productive ending

And when you manage teams of people who work with the public and coach people on these skills, the benefits are even greater—including dramatic improvements in performance, higher morale, lower turnover, and customers who flock to your business. These skills will help your bottom line soar, but they go much deeper than that: These skills create an environment where both you and your employees come to work with a smile on your faces every day and leave for home with one as well. As someone who has watched this approach work time after time, in real-world customer contact teams all over the world, the results are nothing short of magical.

The price for all of these benefits? Simply learning and practicing some simple, verbal techniques that will quickly become a natural part of how you communicate with people. These techniques can replace our human nature with a new set of skills based around the best knowledge that modern behavioral science has to offer. These skills will do more than help you treat people better: They will change your life. Read on, and start taking a fresh new look at the relationship between you and your customers.

A NEW WAY OF LOOKING AT CUSTOMERS

Customer service, like many things in life, is often seen as a morality play. There are good people in it, and bad people. The good people are nice, have great attitudes, and go the extra mile to please you. The bad people are surly, indifferent, and undercook your breakfast. And much of what passes for customer service skills training consists of urging you to be a good person rather than a bad person.

Like any stereotype, there is a grain of truth in this view of the world. There are people who naturally interact well with customers, and those who naturally do not. Nevertheless, I would like to introduce a very different view—one that will dramatically change the way you interact with customers, both now and in the future. This view is based on science rather than feelings. And, more important, this view has been proven over and over again to work.



Your Car Is Gone—Can I Help You?

“What do you say to someone after you’ve just towed their car away?”

As a trainer, I often pose this question to people in the audience—and then usually

encourage a couple of brave volunteers to role-play the situation. Invariably, the situation turns out the same way every time: The first person tries to explain why he or she had to tow the car away, the second person gets angrier and angrier—even in role play—and even the nicest people quickly become like deer frozen in the headlights.

Next, we start looking at the seemingly impossible task of wording this situation in ways that benefit the customer. After some hemming and hawing, the ideas start to flow from the audience: “Your car is in a safe place.” “Even though it unfortunately was towed away, I can help you get your car back.” “I get frustrated when things like this happen to me.” Before long, people are seeing this situation with a new set of eyes—and when we role-play it again, the person whose car has been towed now finds it very hard to stay angry. ■

Many people look at customer service as a matter of how to be nice to people. To me, it is also the science of how you tell people that you have just towed their car away—in a way that most effectively reunites them with their car, while preserving dignity and good feelings on both sides. Put on a larger scale, customer service is the science of how to communicate in any customer situation, in a way that produces the most positive outcome for everyone. This book introduces the liberating idea that you don’t need to change your personality to create excellent customer experiences, but rather can take a fresh look at the mechanics of what you say—in short, by replacing smile training with specific verbal skills.

Nearly every interaction between you and a customer has the potential to go very well, or very badly. And as often as not, the reason has little to do with courtesy or attitude but a great deal to do with behavioral psychology. For example, the way that we encouraged people to respond in the previous situation wasn’t advice that we simply made up—it involved known communications techniques whose results are extremely powerful. The reality of the situation remains exactly the same either way: The person’s car has been towed, and he or she still must pay to retrieve it. But by simply changing the “script” of what you say and do within this reality, you achieve a very different outcome.

This is one small example of a broad range of structured communications skills, which in total create a different kind of customer experience from what we are normally accustomed to. Most of these skills share one important thing in common—they are at odds with how we are instinctively programmed to react to someone else’s problems. This means that changing the dynamics of a customer situation re-

quires changing your normal reactions, by using specific communications techniques that you learn and practice.

These techniques may make sense to you intellectually, but they will probably feel strange when you first start to use them in real life—much like learning a new golf grip or signing your name with the wrong hand. However, with time and practice, these techniques will become an instinctive part of who you are and how you respond to people—which, in turn, will dramatically change the interactions between you and your customers.

BEYOND ATTITUDE

If you are reading this book, chances are that you—or the people you manage—are among the majority of working adults who serve the public in some capacity. Many of you will spend this day taking our dinner orders, solving our technical problems, handling our complaints, or saving our lives—and then get up tomorrow and do it all over again.

This means that you are no stranger to the term *customer service* and probably have the same image of customer service as most people—that you should smile, be courteous, say “please” and “thank you,” and treat customers like they are always right. Deep down inside, you may even believe that excellent customer service is primarily the domain of perky, happy people who always get up on the right side of bed and never have a bad-hair day, but not you.

You could refer to this image as the “attitude” school of customer service—and there is some truth to it, because nice people do tend to provide better customer experiences than unpleasant ones. However, in my own experience of managing real-world customer support operations and training thousands of people in communications skills, this isn’t enough. Nor, surprisingly, is it even the most important thing. Being nice will not carry you through a situation where someone is loudly demanding something you cannot give him or her. Smiling won’t defuse a tense situation where you have to deliver bad news to someone. And courtesy won’t help you take back control of the conversation when someone is overbearing. But the good news is that you *can* handle these situations differently, with the help of a little applied psychology.

In the attitude school of customer service, managers routinely urge their employees to be nice to people, develop slogans to encourage good service, bring in motivational speakers who talk about having a



FROM GOOD SERVICE TO “WOW” SERVICE

“A few weeks from now, you are all going to see customers in a completely new light.”

These were my first words at an all-hands meeting of a customer support call center that I had just joined as its new manager—a team of talented, dedicated people providing twenty-four-hour technical support for a mission-critical software product.

Soon after this meeting, we had the first of several training sessions designed to change the way they responded to the customer situations that they identified as being the most difficult—such as what to say when they could not give someone an on-the-spot answer, how to defuse an irate client, or what to do when someone was talking too much. We also looked in detail at the mechanics of how we did things like greet customers, close transactions, and execute when situations happened. We role-played real-life examples of these situations as a team and followed up with one-on-one coaching over a period of several weeks.

At first, many people found it too easy to revert to human nature and handled situations the way that they always did. But when we started to coach these skills with people individually, things began to change—gradually at first, and then one by one the lights started to come on for everyone on the team. Within a few weeks there was a real change in the air, and from there the results were nothing short of amazing: near-perfect annual customer satisfaction ratings from our clients, best-of-class rankings in industry benchmarks—and a fresh new spirit that was reflected in near-zero turnover for nearly two years.

great attitude, and criticize people when they do not handle customers well. Does this sound like your workplace? If so, you have lots of company, because this scenario follows our human nature. However, with the approach we used in the accompanying sidebar, none of these things happened:

- Instead of being asked to change their attitudes, people were taught techniques that changed the mechanics of what they said and did.
- Instead of being focused on “treating customers better,” the focus was on developing life skills that benefited both their work and their personal life.
- Instead of simply being told what to do by an instructor, they actively role-played situations, performed team exercises, and had one-on-one follow-up coaching.
- Instead of being criticized when they made mistakes back on the floor, these situations became positive and nonjudgmental teaching moments.

More important, instead of following human nature, we followed several timeless principles of behavioral psychology. Although some people refer to customer interactions as a “soft skill,” in reality there is a great deal of hard science behind what happens during the interaction between you and a customer:

- When you deliver bad news to customers, they often react badly.

However, when you rephrase bad news in a specific way—with a formal introduction, a detailed explanation, and a choice of words that speaks from within their frame of reference—they almost *never* get upset with you.

- When you tell customers that they did something wrong, they will usually become defensive. However, if you instead “model” their behavior from your own perspective, by talking about what *you* would or wouldn’t do, they almost always “get it” and don’t feel threatened.
- When you try to ignore an overly talkative person, it fuels the person to talk even more. However, when you actively and enthusiastically engage this person with the right kinds of questions, you can usually take control of the conversation very quickly.

These are just three examples among a wealth of predictable “moments of truth” that occur at known points in the life cycle of a customer transaction. Throughout this book, we will look in detail at how to understand and manage these situations, as well as the many others that occur across the life cycle of a customer service transaction. These skills are part of a growing evolution in the psychology of how we interact with customers—one that steps away from simply telling you to be nice, and moves toward specific verbal skills and techniques that you can use in real-world customer situations.

There is a strong parallel between this evolution and one that has gone on for a long time in professional sports, because competitive teams have a strong incentive to understand the behavioral psychology of what makes them win. Once upon a time, the popular image of a sports coach was that of a short-tempered taskmaster who exhorted people to win at all costs, and yelled at them when they messed up. Today, the most successful coaches are often master tacticians and, more important, master *technicians*.



Winning: It’s All in the Mechanics

New York Yankees skipper Joe Torre isn’t big on motivational speeches. He rarely raises his voice and hates team meetings. Nevertheless, literally hundreds of times per year, he meets one-on-one with his players—to get into their heads, to discuss scenarios, and to talk through the mechanics of how they play. In his book *Joe Torre’s Ground Rules for*

Winners, Torre summarizes his philosophy as “winning is a by-product” and feels that by keeping his focus on the skill sets of his players, the winning will take care of itself. The results of his coaching style speak for themselves, with his Yankees being perennial division and World Series champions since the mid-1990s.¹

On a broader scale, a typical baseball coach from a generation ago might walk out to the mound and tell a struggling pitcher to pitch better—or else. Today, that same coach is more likely to walk out to the mound and say things like, “How is your arm strength? Your fastball is dropping about a foot closer to the plate than it usually does. What do you think about switching to a four-seam fastball for this batter?” The way that Joe Torre describes his management style, he would be unlikely to scream at a player to play better—but he would be very likely to pull him aside at regular intervals and discuss the mechanics of how he functions at the plate and on the field. ■

My goal in this book is not to teach you how to be more polite but to teach you when to use a four-seam fastball. And we will do it by learning structured communications skills that will get the response you want from customers and coaching skills that will get the response you want from people on your team—with no need to change your personality in the process. When you nail the mechanics of both of these skill sets, the good feelings that we call “attitude” invariably follow as a by-product.

Let’s bring some of these principles around to the real world, and look at an actual situation that I recently experienced with a particular service provider. I had inadvertently applied a payment to the wrong account number and needed to get the charge reversed. Here is what transpired:

Agent: Welcome to XYZ Corporation, where we promise to help you in ten minutes or less, guaranteed.

Me: Hi, I’m having a problem with a charge that needs to be reversed.

Agent: I’m sorry, sir, but our computers are down. You’ll have to call us back later.

Me: Can’t you take the information and follow up on it?

Agent: No, sir.

Me: So you aren’t guaranteeing to help me in ten minutes or less?

Agent: Sir, you don’t understand; our computers are down.

Some people may look at this transaction as a case of an indifferent attitude on the part of the agent. Others may look at it as a case of a customer who doesn't understand that there is a problem beyond the agent's control. Still others may chuckle at the irony between this company's scripted greeting and the reality of the situation. However, I see it as a perfect example of a transaction chock-full of interactions that—if worded differently—would create very different feelings, and a very different outcome.

Up to this point, we have frequently mentioned a simple two-word reason why these transactions are so common: *human nature*. In this book, we will explore new ways to communicate that transcend human nature, based on known principles of behavioral psychology. At first, many of them will feel like wearing a T-shirt backward. However, with time—and, more important, practice—they will become a natural part of who you are and how you communicate.

Now, let's return to this transaction and break down the mechanics of what happened in a little more detail:

Review the dialogue in Table 1-1 and then take a moment and mentally play back the responses in the right-hand column in your mind. How would you feel if you were that person's customer? I suspect that many people would feel much better speaking with the person in the far-right column, even if they are not happy about the situation itself.

However, I also want to point out something even more important—at a quick glance, many people would interpret the person in that column as simply being “nicer” about the problem. I am here to tell you that there are specific techniques, at each point in the life cycle of this transaction, that go beyond attitude and become innate skills. Nearly any person can sound like the person in the right-hand column, no matter who he or she is or what his or her personality is, by learning and practicing a specific set of techniques—which, in time, become your natural way of communicating.

WHAT THIS BOOK WILL COVER

This book is based around the premise that excellent customer experiences fundamentally have their roots in what we say to people. In the chapters that follow, we will look in detail at specific techniques to use at each stage of a customer transaction. Starting from when a customer first approaches, we will examine the crucial first thirty seconds of the encounter, and then move forward to those issues that form the

Table 1-1. Human nature vs. customer skills.

Situation	Human nature	Customer skills
Customer introduces problem.	Focus on your problems: "I'm sorry, sir, our computers are down."	Focus on the customer's expectations: "I certainly understand. Normally we can straighten this out right here on the phone."
You can't give customer what he or she wants.	Tell the customer what to do: "You'll have to call us back later."	Give the customer options worded to his or her benefit: "If you can send the request from our website, we can process it as soon as our computers are up. Would you like to do that, or would it be easier to call us back later?"
Saying no.	Just say no: "No, sir."	Anticipate the customer's reaction: "I wish that there was a way that we could do this, because I hate to see you have to call back again."
The customer questions your response.	Defend yourself: "Sir, you don't understand; our computers are down."	Speak from the customer's voice: "It's really frustrating when we can't help people in a situation like this."

groundwork of a customer transaction: how to communicate effectively, deliver information, get into a customer's mind-set, and look at some surprising ways to show respect and empathy.

Next, we look in detail at the tough issues of working with customers: preventing confrontations from starting by managing expectations, defusing angry situations, understanding specific personalities, and handling people who take up large amounts of time. The approaches we use here may surprise you as well: For example, you will learn how to strike the word *no* from your vocabulary (really!), how to calm down an angry person without ever needing to defend yourself,

and how to quickly “smoke out” different customer types and speak their language. These approaches are based on solid behavioral research, as well as extensive experience in the real world, and you will be amazed at how well they will work with your own customers.

Finally, we move on to the advanced course: a novel and effective strategy for coaching other people with these customer skills; advice on how to apply these skills in some of the toughest real-life situations imaginable; and, perhaps most important, an insightful look at how these skills can change all the relationships in your life, inside and outside of work.

This book is designed to teach you interpersonal and leadership skills that will last for a lifetime, and change your perceptions about how you deal with people—and in my experience, there is no limit to where these skills can take you. Read on, and you will learn that excellent customer skills are not the domain of a few people who are so-called naturals at it, but can become strong career and life skills for *any* person who learns and practices these techniques.