

Brushing up on Customer Care



Name: _____

Brushing up on CUSTOMER CARE

CONTENTS

Introduction		3
Section 1:	Your customers and what they expect from you	6
Section 2:	Ways of providing effective customer care	11
Section 3:	Handling customer complaints	15
Section 4:	Coping with the stress customers bring	19

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Introduction

Information and skills you will acquire

Brushing up on Customer Care is one of a valuable and user-friendly new series of easy-to-read booklets created specially to help you develop at work. The materials have been created from actual experience in workplace training. Experts have pooled their knowledge and experience to involve you in learning new skills and building on those you already have. The booklet is divided into clear *sections*, containing specially devised *activities* and a *mini project*, to allow you to *practise* as you learn.

Brushing up on Customer Care will enable you to:

- Understand what customer care is. Identify your customers.
- Understand the differences between internal and external customers, direct and indirect customers.
- Identify things that you already do to provide effective customer care and consider areas for improvement.
- Identify why people complain. Develop techniques to sort out complaints effectively.
- Relieve yourself of some of the stress from working directly with customers and clients. Feel more positive about working with your customers and clients – even the very difficult ones!
- You may want to work your way through the booklet from start to finish or focus on an area of interest.
- Once you have completed the questionnaire on page 4 you will be able to see clearly which topics you need most help with, and which areas you can safely leave out.
- The questionnaire will also allow you to create your own learning plan for which an example and space is provided on page 5.
- You may want to ask your supervisor or another colleague for their views on the areas you could work on, or for help with the activities in the booklet.
- As you may want to use the booklet for future reference, you may want to write the answers out in rough first and then write them in the booklet.

Getting the most out of this booklet

Questionnaire

What do you need most help with?

This questionnaire is to enable you to think about what areas of customer care skills you need most help with.

	How often do you need this information/do this in your job?				How confident do you feel?		
	A	B	C	D	1	2	3
	not at all	not very often	fairly often	frequently	not at all	fairly	very
SECTION 1: Understand what customer care is							
Identify who your customers are							
Understand the difference between internal and external customers							
Understand the difference between direct and indirect customers							
Identify what your customers expect from you							
SECTION 2: The do's and don'ts of providing products or services							
The do's and don'ts of following systems and procedures							
The do's and don'ts of using interpersonal skills							
SECTION 3: Understand why customers complain							
Sort out customer complaints							
SECTION 4: Identify the personal stress created by customers							
Use different ways of relieving the stress							
Develop ways to feel more positive about your job							

Tick boxes as appropriate The most important areas for you to focus on are those, which you have marked with B,C, D and/or 1 or 2.

Section I

YOUR CUSTOMERS AND WHAT THEY EXPECT FROM YOU

What does customer care mean?

We all know what it is like to receive good customer care. It's that nice feeling we get when we are helped to select the right product, when the repair is done properly and on time, when we are not left waiting for ages, when people take the time to tell us what is happening.

Customer care is not only about giving people what they want. It is also about telling people when things are not possible and handling complaints in such a way that they feel satisfied with what has happened, even though they have not got what they wanted.

Activity I

Defining customer care

Write down in your own words what you think customer care is.

You will find the feedback to this activity on page 23.

Who are your customers?

Your customers will depend on the type of organisation you work for and your role within it. For example, if you are a hospital porter your main customers will be patients, but you could also say that visitors and nurses are also your customers because you will also be providing a service for these people.

If you work as a production supervisor in a factory making potato crisps your main customer will be the consumer. However, you could also say that you are providing a service for other sections in the company, such as sales, in making sure that you produce enough potato crisps to meet their orders.

If you work in the planning department of a local authority you could say that the whole community within your area are your customers, including councillors and children. This is much wider than the people with whom you have direct contact in your job.

Activity 2

Who are your customers?

The table below lists some different groups of customers. Put a tick against the groups you consider to be your customers. We have left a space for you to add any groups not already included in this list, with whom you have contact.

- People wanting the service
- People wanting the product
- People buying the service or product
- People who have to use the service or product
- People wanting advice or information
- Potential users of the product or service
- People who complain
- Visitors
- Elderly people
- Adults
- Teenagers
- Children
- People with disabilities
- Ethnic minorities
- Councillors
- Colleagues
- Clients
- Management Board
- Shareholders

FEEDBACK: Show this activity to your manager/supervisor/colleague to see if they agree with the groups you have ticked.

Direct and indirect customers

There are those to whom you provide a service. These are called direct customers. There are other people who may come to the organisation to ask for information or who may be affected by what you are doing even though you do not deal with them directly. These are indirect customers and they may also be potential customers.

The differences between internal and external customers: From your list of groups of customers, you may notice that some customers may come to you from outside the organisation (external customers) and there are other people such as colleagues who we provide products and services for within the organisation (internal customers).

Customer Care and expectations

Customer care is all about people expectations. Some people are content with a minimum service, other people ask for a lot more. Until you know what your customers expect it is impossible to know if you are providing customer care.

Mini Project

On page 9 is an example of a simple questionnaire, for you to give to a number of people you work with. It will help you to find out what they think your customers –internal and external – expect from you and whether you meet those expectations. You may want to use the questionnaire as it is, or you may wish to adapt it.

We have put the questionnaire on a single page to make it easy for you to photocopy.

When all the questionnaires are returned, take a look at the results. Do most of the responses make the same or similar points? Have some points been made about customer expectations, of which you were unaware? Make some notes on a separate sheet of paper.

Customer care questionnaire

I am using some self-study materials to help me develop my skills in delivering customer care. I would be grateful if you could spend a few minutes completing the following questionnaire.

1. Who do you consider to be my external customers?

2. Who do you consider to be my internal customers?

3. What do you think these customers expect from me in my role?

External customer expectations

Internal customer expectations

4. Do you think these expectations are met? If not, how are these not met?

5. Do you think the unmet expectations are realistic?

Thank you for completing the questionnaire. Please return it to:

Name: _____

Room: _____

Key Learning Points

- The meaning of customer care can vary from organisation to organisation and depends a great deal on the type of service or product delivered.
- General definitions of customer care include words and phrases such as 'quality', 'fair treatment', 'courtesy', 'speed', 'efficiency', 'putting mistakes right', 'customer satisfaction' etc.
- All organisations have different groups of customers such as the elderly, females, people who use the product or service, people who complain.
- There are different sorts of customers. There are those to whom we provide a service or product – 'direct customers' – and those who may be affected by what we are doing even though we do not deal with them directly. These are called 'indirect customers'.
- Colleagues are customers if you are providing a product or service to them within the organisation. These are called internal customers. People who come to you from outside the organisation are called external customers.
- Customer care is about meeting people's expectations. Some people are content with a minimum standard of service; other people want a lot more. One of the key skills in delivering customer care is to leave the customer feeling satisfied even when it is not realistically possible to give them everything they want.

Section 2 WAYS OF PROVIDING EFFECTIVE CUSTOMER CARE

Customer care can be divided into three main areas. These are:

- the product or service you provide
- the systems and paperwork you provide
- your interpersonal skills.

We will now look at some of the do's and don'ts in each of these areas.

Providing a product or service

Do:

- always provide the product/service to the agreed specification – if you are in doubt, ask and clarify
- make sure that you meet any laid down standards – if you are in a rush, find out from your supervisor what the priorities are
- make it known to your supervisor if there are problems beyond your control e.g. faulty equipment, poor quality supplies
- ask for training if you think the product/service would benefit from you improving your skills.

Don't:

- promise a product or service you cannot deliver
- cut corners – it will rebound on you later.

Following systems and procedures

Do:

- always follow systems and procedures even if you think they are silly – you will not be helping the customer if things are not done properly or if you are knocked down by a bus and nobody can find the paperwork
- always double check that you have done everything required and not overlooked anything.

Don't:

- try to bend the system for particular customers – they will end up disappointed and you will be stressed
- put off routine things such as getting signatures, filing, numbering your computer or sending out written confirmation. If you do not do these things straight away they will build up and create problems for you, the customer and your colleagues.

Interpersonal skills

Do:

- always try to be pleasant even if you do not feel like it
- motivate yourself to seem genuinely interested
- try to give a reasonable explanation to complaints and queries so that the customer understands why things are as they are
- find someone to answer any questions you cannot answer, or agree with the customer that you will get back to them at an agreed time
- always try to sound positive about things rather than running things down
- be discrete about personal or sensitive information
- apologise if you are in the wrong but do not allow yourself to give in to bullying or aggressive behaviour
- ask your colleagues for help if a situation is getting too much for you.

Don't:

- lose your temper even if your patience is being tried to the limit – it will not help in the long run
- ignore customers while you are on the phone or doing something else
- leave people waiting unnecessarily
- promise things just to get rid of people.

Whatever your job there are many do's and don'ts in providing good customer care. These are important ground rules.

Activity 3

What is the best thing to do?

Take a look at the seven difficult situations we have given below. What should you do in each situation? Choose one solution for each situation from the list we have given you. Write the letter of the appropriate solution in the box.

What should you do in this situation?

1. You have a queue of customers and the phone keeps ringing.
2. A very aggressive person comes in and demands something which your organisation cannot possibly provide.
3. A colleague is having difficulty meeting a deadline.
4. You have so much to do you don't know how you can provide everything to the right standard.
5. You are being held up by another department and the customer thinks the late delivery is your fault.

6. A customer comes in to complain about something and you know you are in the wrong.
7. You know your organisation sometimes provides a poor quality product or service and yet another customer has come in to complain.

Solutions

- a. Only do the work for people who you know will not complain.
- b. Agree to anything just to get rid of the person.
- c. Start gossiping with your colleagues.
- d. Apologise and offer to put it right.
- e. Rush and get your supervisor.
- f. Deny everything because you think it will put you in a bad light.
- g. Talk to your supervisor, explain the problem and ask him/her to prioritise or allocate some of the work to someone else.
- h. Turn your back on the queue and answer the telephone.
- i. Ask if the colleague needs some help as you may need him/her to help you.
- j. Give in to the person just to get rid of him or her.
- k. Be positive and offer the customer whatever recompense is in your power to provide.
- l. Attend to the customer first of all then answer the phone.
- m. Try to get the hold-up sorted out through your supervisor.
- n. Try to be as calm as you can, listen to the person and explain clearly why you cannot give them what they want.

You will find the feedback to this activity on page 23.

Activity 4

What do you do to provide customer care?

What ways do you give good customer care in your job? Take a sheet of paper and make a list.

Now make a list of the ways you feel you could improve the customer care you deliver. Make notes on any procedures you would like to see introduced. You may like to talk to your supervisor as a follow-up to this activity.

Key Learning Points

- We can divide customer care into three areas. These are: the product or service you provide, the systems and paperwork you use and your interpersonal skills.
- Don't promise a customer a product or service which you are not sure that you can deliver.
- Always follow systems and procedures even if you think they are a waste of time.
- Do not try to bend the system when you feel sorry for needy customers.
- Always try to be pleasant even if the customer is not.
- Always try to help the customer understand the reasoning behind decisions.
- Don't leave people waiting more than 2–3 minutes unless they agree to wait longer.
- Don't ignore the customer while you are on the telephone or using the computer.

What do complaining customers want?

Most customers are reasonable. There are a few who will not be satisfied whatever you do. When customers contact you with a complaint they may be feeling:

- nervous about making the complaint
- angry at the inconvenience
- fed up that they bought the service or product in the first place
- unsure that they will be treated fairly.

Part of sorting out the complaint is also taking into account these feelings. In all situations customers expect the following:

- to be listened to
- to be treated with courtesy
- to be taken seriously
- for you to be calm
- not to be interrupted when they are initially trying to explain the problem
- not to be kept waiting
- for the problem to be followed up
- to get a reasonable explanation as to what can be done or why the problem cannot be put right.

How to sort out customer complaints

There are a number of steps you can take which will help you sort out customer complaints.

- Listen to what the customer has to say without interrupting.
- Allow customers to let off steam in order to help them calm down. Do not start to argue with them. In a face to face situation offer a seat, if possible, as sitting tends to calm people.
- Once the customer has calmed down a bit begin asking questions, focusing on what you can do to solve the problem now, rather than what has happened in the past.
- Take notes as this will help you remember what the customer has said. It also lets the customer see that you are taking the complaint seriously.
- If the organisation is at fault, apologise and explain what happened.
- Tell the customer what you can do for him/her and offer options if possible.
- If your organisation is not at fault and you can't resolve the complaint, explain why. For example, the guarantee for a product has run out or the customer has not supplied the right information.

- Explain what the customer can do to avoid the problem in the future.
- If the customer is at fault, try to be as discreet and tactful as possible. Try to avoid comments such as ‘this is what you did wrong’. Instead focus on what should be done to rectify the problem.

Activity 6

Face to face with an angry customer

An elderly lady, Mrs Barnes, comes into the council offices to complain about her dustbin not being emptied. She is very rude to the receptionist, Pam, and tells her that she is a parasite. She starts shouting about what a waste of money the council services are.

Pam gets very annoyed as there are other people around and she resents being spoken to like that. Pam interrupts and says that if Mrs Barnes had left the bin on her boundary it would have been emptied. Pam then goes off to find the missed bin records for Mrs Barnes’ road and leaves Mrs Barnes still ranting and raving.

After ten minutes Pam returns and shows the records to Mrs Barnes to prove that she did not leave her bin on her boundary to be emptied. Pam says because of this she can’t help her. Mrs Barnes leaves the council building waving her walking stick in the air. She threatens to report Pam to her MP.

A few days later Pam’s manager receives a letter from the local MP saying that Mrs Barnes has been treated unsympathetically and because of her arthritis she cannot move the bin to her boundary for collection.

You will find the feedback to this activity on page 23.

What could Pam have done to bring the situation to a more satisfactory conclusion?

Key Learning Points

- Customers complain for a number of reasons. An important part of providing customer care is finding out what the complaints are and seeing if there is anything that can be done to meet the customers' expectations.
- It is important to understand how the customer is feeling when he/she makes a complaint and for you to show that you genuinely want to help.
- Always begin by listening to the customer and allowing him/her to let off steam.
- If your organisation is at fault, apologise, explain what happened and offer some options, if possible, as to how the problem can be sorted out.
- If your organisation is not at fault, or cannot deliver what the customer wants, give a clear and full explanation to the customer so that he/she can understand the reasoning behind it.
- Always treat your customer as an individual and try, if possible, to meet any special needs.
- If your customer is abusive to you, try not to take it personally. However you need to point out to them that you want to help but their behaviour is preventing you from sorting out the situation.

Ways of relieving stress

You will not be able to remove all the stress from your job but there are certain things that you can do to help relieve some of the stresses so that you are physically and emotionally able to cope with the challenges.

If you feel that everything is getting too much for you, one of the first things you must do is to take a deep breath and start to think about what you are doing.

You cannot do everything at once. Think about the thing which is most urgent and important for you to do and focus on that. If you are unsure about what to do first, ask your supervisor.

If customers are abusive don't take it personally. They are angry with the organisation, not you. Do not constantly allow yourself to be sworn at or abused. Explain to the person that you want to help them but you will be prevented from doing so if they continue with their abuse.

Ground rules

- Don't take short cuts with systems and procedures. This will only catch up with you at a later date.
- Try not to get emotionally involved with customers that you feel sorry for. This will sap your energy and you may feel like bending the system for them.
- If a customer refuses to listen to you, or does not seem to understand what you are saying, ask someone to help you. This may also help the customer to calm down.
- Try to do the things that you are not looking forward to first thing. This way they will not drag you down for the rest of the day.
- Don't start working extra hours or taking work home over a long period of time. You will only work more inefficiently.
- Don't worry about things out of work. Eat well, sleep well and try to do things you like doing in your leisure time.

Activity 8

Rick has just started his job handling customer enquiries and complaints for an electrical goods wholesaler. He finds the job very stressful with customers constantly ringing up and coming in. He also feels under pressure when he has to liaise with colleagues and complete the paperwork. The work is piling up. Rick finds it difficult to talk to his colleagues and feels isolated.

Another problem he faces is that he does not know enough about the products and the guarantees, to

FeedBack toActivities

FEEDBACK TO ACTIVITY 1

A good description of customer care will include some of the following words: 'treating people as individuals', 'fair treatment', 'good service', 'putting faults right', 'courtesy', 'politeness', 'listening', 'honesty', 'taking trouble with things'.

FEEDBACK TO

ACTIVITY 3 Answers:

1. l, 2. n, 3. i, 4. g, 5. m, 6. d, 7. k

FEEDBACK TO ACTIVITY 6

Whatever their job, nobody has to accept abuse. Pam should have reminded Mrs Barnes that she was there to help her. Pam should also have told Mrs Barnes that her angry behaviour was preventing her from sorting out the situation.

Pam should have listened to the customer and asked questions to find out what the problem was. For example, 'Did you leave your bin on your boundary or is this a problem for you?'

Pam's next mistake was to leave Mrs Barnes waiting for 10 minutes. Never leave a customer, especially a complaining customer, for any longer than 2–3 minutes. This will only give them time to feel more angry and resentful.

Pam should have treated Mrs Barnes as an individual and tried to meet her special needs as an elderly person. If Pam wasn't sure what to do, she should have told Mrs Barnes that she would find out what could be done to help her. Pam should also reassure Mrs Barnes by telling when she would get that information and asking her what was the best way of contacting her.

FEEDBACK TO ACTIVITY 8

To overcome his stress, Rick needs to recognise that any new job is stressful because there is so much to learn. This tends to get better after a short period of time. He should ask more experienced colleagues when he is facing a problem he cannot sort out. He should also take notes to help him to remember.

Rick should talk to his supervisor about his difficulties and ask for some more training. Rick should also observe how more experienced colleagues handle customer care and try to use the same words and style, until he is confident enough to develop his own way of handling situations.

Do you have any of these problems with your customer care? If the answer is 'yes' to one or more of the questions below, you will find that this booklet will help you to develop your customer care skills and also gain more understanding about what needs to be done.

Are you ever unsure about what it takes to deliver effective customer care?

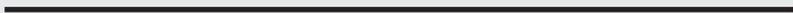
Do you panic when a customer or client becomes angry?

Would you like to get more satisfaction out of working with customers and clients?

Do you know what customer care means to your customers? Are you able to satisfy them even if you cannot give them exactly what they want?

Would you like to remove some of the stress out of working directly with customers?

Do you find it difficult to treat some of your colleagues as customers?



Workbase Training is a national specialist organisation for workforce learning and development. These booklets are based on work with over 20,000 employees within 120 organisations since 1980. Workbase is a not-for-profit charitable company, limited by guarantee, and is supported by the Confederation of British Industry and the Trades Union Congress and other unions.

The Campaign for Learning is a national charity seeking to create an appetite for learning in everyone. Its four areas of work are Workplace Learning & Skills, Family Learning, Learning to Learn and influencing policy. It co-ordinates Learning at Work Day and a Family Learning Festival each year. The Campaign is supported by the government, a wide range of businesses, local authorities, voluntary sector organisations and individuals.

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