

Effective Communication and Service Strategies for Government Employees

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EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATON AND SERVICE STRATEGIES FOR GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES

I hope you are having a great day and are ready to look at some ways that we all can consider to improve our customer service to our constituents. In our political environment today, we need all the positive help we can get. If we do a good job of serving customers and showing them that we are a necessary part of what government is supposed to do for its people, then our entire profession will be well served. So let's get started.

We can learn a great deal from our own experiences with customer service, especially with government agencies when we are the customers. What other agencies do and don't do will likely be one of the best things for us to study to improve our own customer service.

2 The last time I went to have my driver's license renewed, I waited over three hours for a process that took only three minutes to complete. I watched in despair and frustration as employees moved like snails to complete the routine tasks. There were no smiles on any faces at the DMV. The customers snarled at their children waiting with them, other customers sighed deeply as the waste of the hours weighed heavily on them, and the employees didn't seem to care about anything. They would hastily glance at a customer's paperwork only to shuffle them away with orders for additional forms or requirements. It was an awful day.

My most recent experience with federal government employees was a visit to my local post office a little after 4:00 PM. I needed to mail a package and purchase some stamps. The line was out the door. When I finally got to the door, I began to understand why. Two clerks were at the counter designed for eight. While these two employees dealt with the myriad of customer requests, four—yes, four-- workers stood behind the counter chatting about something. It may have been business, but from their expressions, it seemed more like a long joke session. I also noted how sloppy they looked. I wondered what happened to the starched blue uniforms that the postal service used to wear. What happened to the neat haircuts and clean shaven faces? What happened to the great service of the U.S. Postal Service that once ascribed to the motto, "...through rain, sleet,

snow, and gloom of night...”? Add comment that not all state offices or post offices are like this. Each office develops its own culture unless they make conscientious choices to be a particular way. Most recent experience with DMV with getting my son’s license. Most recent experience with USPS.

Many of us in government jobs consider our customer service to be different from the experiences I described with state and federal government employees -- but are we really different? Some agencies honestly have the attitude that customers can’t go anywhere else, so why worry about how we treat them? Other agencies have a culture of anger and frustration that gets taken out on the poor customer the moment they enter the door. Employees believe that all their customers are liars and cheats, and it is their job to ferret out how they are trying to cheat the system. Let me warn you -- we are living in a new world where there are many reasons to treat people as our best customers, and the agencies that get on board will be those that survive the political onslaughts that are likely ahead from constituents who are demanding better, more efficient service from government.

3 In today’s world there is an increasing competition for earnings from all kinds of sources. Who would have ever dreamt 20 years ago that we could order something on our computer and have it delivered to our doorstep in the next two days without extra cost? Stores and other businesses are having to learn to adapt to a new culture and new competition and those who offer excellence in customer service will survive while others will fail. We can learn much from the private sector companies that treat their customers well. We can become agencies where customers enjoy going, and we can learn to be a source of accurate information for all of our constituents.

Many private companies had to rediscover that profit is not the most important thing-- customers are. As business guru Peter Drucker stated, “If a company takes care of its customer base, profits will be a by-product of that customer care.” Many types of training, processes, and surveys are focused on customer satisfaction.

Almost every store I walk into these days, I am greeted by the salesperson working there—even in convenience stores. Welcome to _____ they say. Whether or not they mean it, it says to me that the owner of this establishment is glad that I'm shopping here. They instruct their employees to welcome me, and it causes me to return to the store again and again if they are providing needed products and services and seem to be glad I'm there.

Another example of this type of private sector business for our consideration is a regional grocery store in my area. Groceries are something we all have to have, and most people find a store they like and stick with it. This successful grocery chain is probably the highest priced one, yet their customers remain loyal. Why? Because there are store personnel everywhere, ready to assist customers. They all smile and greet everyone they meet. They make the customer feel welcome. They often know their regular customers by name and greet them that way. They take purchases to the car. People are often willing to pay a little extra for that kind of service.

Sometime people are willing to pay a lot for that type of service. Take Nordstrom's for example. They have always been known for exceptional customer service. They are ready to do whatever it takes to assist their customers and satisfy their desires. They are always attentive to their customers, but move away if the customer just wants to shop. If a customer needs their help, they respond immediately. They have even been known to make exchanges of products that did not even come from their store.

Another example is provided by Ritz-Carlton. Every one of their employees from cleaning people to top management are allowed to spend up to \$2000 to satisfy the needs or desires of one of their customers. Their motto is "Whatever it takes", and the concept is engrained in the minds of each employee. Their room rates are very high priced, but they don't have a shortage of customers because affluent people are willing to pay for exceptional customer service.

Every Christmas my family watches *Miracle on 34th Street*. In the movie, the store, on the verge of being forced out of business, adopts the

policy that “if Cole’s doesn’t have it, we will find it for you.” In the movie, and in real life, this kind of customer service works.
Why Does Government Even Care?

4 You may say that people have to come to us. “We don’t have competition. **5** Our agency is the only place they can get what they need. **6** These people need us and they ought to appreciate us. We don’t need them and their attitudes. Besides, I was checking my Facebook page and text messages. I don’t need to be interrupted.”

7 The results of these attitudes are not good. Our customers begin to hate us and paint all government employees with the same brush. **8** And our customers walk in the door with a bad attitude and a chip on their shoulder. Everyone gets frustrated and angry and the tensions continue to build. Customers are becoming more and more vocal and politically active. **9** With the ease of contacting legislators via e-mail and the Internet, opportunities to call in to local talk radio, and often being governed by politicians who continue to stir the pot for political gain, our agencies can quickly become the victims of the “tar and feather” mentality of today’s political climate. Those board members or elected officials we work for may become the targets of customers who have become extremists because of our poor customer service. **10** Everybody involved gets frustrated and angry. **11**

So bear with me for the next few minutes and open up your mind to the idea of change. Consider this: enhancing relationships with our customers and other stakeholders results in less stress, more productivity, a better working environment, and a win-win for all of us. **12** So what is your attitude? If it is negative, I encourage you to consider an alternative.

As we consider providing excellent customer service to your constituents, think about private companies that you swear you will never do business with again. What did they do that caused you to feel the way you do? Probably the list includes some of the following: **13** They are rude, they ignore me, they don't try to resolve my problems, or they are dishonest and deceptive.

Now, think about companies who have provided you with excellent customer service. What did they do that caused you to continue to do business with them and to recommend them to others? Likely they do some of these things: **14** They respect me, they are honest, they find solutions for my issues, they smile, they listen, they do what they say, they know me, and they appreciate me. You probably could add others. This exercise is a great way to begin the process toward providing excellent customer service as a government employee. If you like to be treated in a particular way, it is probably safe to say that your customers would have similar desires for good customer service.

You may immediately push back on these ideas and argue that we, as government employees, have to adhere to a set group of laws and policies. "We can't make people happy." I beg to differ. It is true that we don't have \$2000 at our disposal like Ritz Carlton employees to solve a customer's problem, but we do have personal resources that can make all the difference in how we are perceived by them. I can almost see you shutting off your computer with a comment like this: "This guy's crazy. He doesn't know the kind of people I deal with. Customers are angry and hateful. Their comments make me so mad that I have to retaliate and set them straight." Well honestly, I've tried it both ways. I used to have a little plaque on my desk that stated, "I don't get mad, I get even". I actually had that philosophy until I saw what it was doing to me and to the relationships with people around me. I decided that there must be a better way, and through study, trial, and error, I believe I have found it. Our agency is recognized by all our stakeholders as having excellent customer service. It has been our philosophy for 25 years.

Change begins with a paradigm shift. Paradigm describes how we see the world. Steven Covey's paradigm shift. Change is very difficult without a

change in how we view the world around us. If we think that all our customers are rude and stupid, we can probably find plenty of evidence to support that paradigm. But we can choose differently.

For those who say that people or circumstances “make” them a certain way, they relegate themselves to an animal state. Animals respond to stimuli. As Pavlov proved in early experiments, when dogs heard the ringing of a bell and then were fed, they began to salivate. They associated the bell with food. Then when the bell was rung but no food was present, they still salivated. They had been trained to respond to a particular stimulus. Most animals, when encountering danger, either get in a fight or flight mode and act accordingly. On the other hand, human beings are endowed with four characteristics that allow us to respond differently: **16**

1. We can be aware of ourselves and our tendencies [EXPAND ON THESE](#)
2. We have a conscience
3. We have imagination, and
4. We have independent will

Those characteristics make us different from animals. **17** But too often, we revert to animalistic instincts unless we have thoroughly analyzed how we want to be when we are put under pressure. At that moment between stimulus and response, we apply our belief and value systems. If we have the idea that “people make us so mad,” who is in control of our lives? Other people are, of course. I don’t like the idea of being controlled by anyone. So I have developed a personal constitution that I do my best to follow each day. I choose to treat everyone kindly, regardless of how they are acting. I choose to be a servant and give my talents to those I serve to the very best of my ability. It is my choice. **18**

If you now know and understand that the choice is yours, begin this idea of excellent customer service by committing yourself personally to that goal.

19 I would challenge you today to write out a description of the kind of person that you want to be in your relationships with others and keep the

document handy. Review it often so that when a difficult customer challenges you, your response will be based on your value system, not a reaction to the stimulus. You might want to put key elements of your customer service position right next to your phone or in constant view when you are at your work station. Ultimately, each one of us is in control of ourselves. All the dictates and policies that can be implemented will not be as effective as the internal decision to say, "I will be an excellent public servant seeking in every way to offer excellent customer service at every opportunity."

Will an Agency Focus on Excellent Customer Service?

So who decides whether or not a governmental agency will work on excellent customer service? Obviously, the best solution is to focus from the top to the bottom of an agency. A commitment by the top person in the agency makes the program much more likely to succeed. Agency directives and policies that support excellent customer service set a positive tone for the organization. Leading by example is the best way to move an agency toward excellent customer service. As we move into the specific things to do, the manager who is listening should examine his or her own actions and how he or she might be doing some things that do not support the idea of excellent customer service. Managers should always set the example for all employees of an agency. Actions speak louder than words.

Even though employees may not work for an agency that values excellent customer service, it is still in an employee's best interest to provide it. An employee that is willing to go the extra mile to serve customers will often receive accolades from the public, and they may become a change catalyst in making the entire agency a better place. We should never underestimate the power of one. As Edward Hale so aptly said, "I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do."

Let's think back to our ideas on companies with which we like to do business. Why do you like to visit that store or order from that company? My guess is that it will be because of some of these traits, and these traits are the same ones we can use to provide the excellent customer service that will enhance the reputation of our agencies.

1. **20** Employees smile and greet customers. One of the easiest things to do to start a positive interchange is to smile and look at the person to whom you plan to communicate. **EXPANSION OF THESE POINTS WITH ILLUSTRATIONS...** Dan- smile, shake and introduction, go to the front and escort customer to office, then escort back out.
2. **21** **Employees** offer to help the person. "How may I help you today?" That may get a sarcastic or angry response initially, but stay with the smile and remember your values.
3. **22** Remember the customer's name and use it throughout your conversation. People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Saying their name appropriately within the context of the conversation speaks volumes to your customer.
4. **23** **Make** eye contact with your customer.
5. **24** Employees listen empathically. Diagnose before you prescribe. As Stephen Covey teaches, "You would never go back to a doctor for treatment if he did not ask you questions about your ailments, do appropriate testing, and then diagnose." But we live in such a hurry-up society that we too often listen to the least bit of information that we think we need and then offer a fix. **TONE OF VOICE/recording of voice**
 - a. Be aware that many times our customers are angry and frustrated about other things in their lives that they may have no power over and they come into our offices with a chip on their shoulder. It is important to recognize their emotional state. Until they know that we know they are angry, they will continue to act angry. To simply state, "Mr. Jones, I can tell that you are very frustrated about this situation." The listener has acknowledged the customer's mood so he or she no longer has to act that way. It sounds simple, but it works. Listening empathically means attentive listening. One should look the customer in the eye, make appropriate comments, nod one's head in understanding, and make appropriate facial expressions.
 - b. Be sure that you understand the problem. Listen carefully and attentively as the customer explains his issue. Mentally

brainstorm as he or she explains the situation about how you might solve their issue and stay within the law. Always empathize with the customer on these kinds of issues. No one likes to hear that they are too late to right a wrong. It does not sit well. Choose words of response that express empathy. For instance, "I know this sounds harsh, but our state law will not let me do what you are requesting at this time, but I will certainly be happy to work with you when you qualify to receive your request." That kind of response is so much better than "You're too late. There is nothing you can do."

- c. **25** Help your customer get a "yes" answer. If an application is incorrect or a benefit is not yet available, excellent customer servants will provide assistance on how the customer can get what he wants. Offer suggestions about how and when the "no" can become a "yes". The customer may just need additional information to understand what the form is asking in order to be legally given the benefit.
- d. **26** Recognize differences in people. First, there are very few people who really understand government laws and regulations. Always speak using common words rather than "agency jargon and acronyms". Also, many jurisdictions have large numbers of foreign speaking customers, many of whom are intimidated by anything to do with the government. Having staff members who speak most of the languages that are reflected in the community is very important to ensure that these customers understand the agency and their rights. If it is not possible to hire personnel who speak the languages of the community, every effort should be made to contract with a person who can provide translations on an "as needed" basis. Appointments can be made with persons who speak those languages so that they are not inconvenienced. Also, the agency should consider publishing general information in the languages that are prevalent in the community. The agency can also solicit neighborhood leadership to help get information to their community. Often, ministers are trusted people whose congregations will listen to them about governmental matters. Community organizers and

neighborhood groups may also be agents that can share information helpful to their constituents.

- e. **27** Learn to say “no” in a positive way. A customer never wants to hear the word “no” but how we say that word can make it a bit easier. Again, the answer is to have an empathetic heart. “I wish I could do this for you, but I am not able to do it due to our state law. I would be happy to get you a copy of the law if you would like to see it. And continue to show appropriate facial expressions. **DON'T LAUGH WHILE SAYING NO**

Building an excellent customer service team takes working together **28**

- a. One of the best ways for a department to succeed in providing great customer service is to begin by meeting together for a brainstorming session sharing ideas that are specifically designed for each department. The best ideas often come from the first line service providers who have learned over the years what works best. It may have been a long time since the manager worked on the front lines, and getting suggestions from those hard workers enlighten other employees and validates the front line employees. Everyone likes to hear that they're important, so a manager who asks a front line employee for advice on good customer service is paying the ultimate compliment and creating good customer service internally and externally.
- b. **29** Another way to ensure quality customer service is to use “coaches” to assist team members. **Bear Bryant observe, instruct and correct, praise.** Coaches can be professional business coaches or can be internal people. My opinion is that the best coach is one who has dealt with the same circumstances that employees are facing and works with them daily. They can watch for good performance and poor performance and respond accordingly. Peers can coach one another if it is clearly understood that this is a way of improvement and not a knit-picking session. When using a coach, be sure that the coach praises publicly and corrects privately. The following tools work very well to ensure that

employees are knowledgeable and accurate in their communications with customers.

- i. Managers and employees can develop scripts for employees to use for common situations. How successful employees answer the public's questions can be the topic of weekly or monthly meetings of staff sharing ideas that have been successful as well as asking questions of peers on how to answer new or unfamiliar questions.
 - ii. Managers should communicate with all employees about events or activities that are coming up like law changes, or other new or timely events. This helps employees become educated on topics that will generate the most frequently asked questions and build their self-esteem as a by-product.
 - iii. Employees can also learn appropriate responses to situations by role-playing in training environments and by listening in to experienced peers and their comments and explanations to customers.
 - iv. Cross-training and additional training for employees will often enhance customer service for two reasons. First, I know of no employee who really likes to admit that they don't know the answer to a customer's question. If all employees can be educated to a level where they can answer 95% of the questions posed by customers, it gives the employee a sense of value and confidence. Secondly, by getting the correct answer from the *first* person they talk with, the customer is typically better satisfied. They don't have their time wasted by transferring from employee to employee, and they get the impression that the employees of the agency know what they are doing.
- c. All employees must follow through with promises or commitments made. Nothing is more infuriating than to be promised that some action will be taken and then nothing happens. Another call is made and another promise of action is made and still nothing happens. Excellent customer service must include fulfilling promises quickly and accurately. To

ensure that promises are kept, it is wise that the employee have a daily task list in hand-written or computer format that will serve as a reminder of things to be completed. Sometimes a ringing phone will not let us complete a task at that very moment, so a list reminds us to go back and complete the promise. I would recommend that the task list contain the customer's name, account number, phone number, and a brief note to remind the employee of the conversation. Once the task is completed, the event is checked off the list, but a history of events remains available to refer to in the future.

Excellent Telephone Service 30

Most of the contacts that agencies receive are from phone calls. Our society is so busy that citizens make calls about their issues from cell phones or home phones while doing other things. Many of the same practices that we have already discussed are good practices to follow in phone conversations as well, but there are some additional things that should be considered.

1. I would suggest that when an employee answers the phone, they should have an introductory script they follow. For instance, "Hello, you have reached the public information department. My name is Anna. How may I help you today?" As the customer explains their issue, the employee should be taking notes on paper or in their computer system. It is especially nice to get the customer's name and use their name throughout the conversation. (Mr. Smith, the application that you are needing can be found on our website. Do you see the link now? Do you see that document? Thank you Mr. Smith.)
2. **31** With phone calls, the customer cannot see the employee. Only the words shared and the inflections of the voice communicate. Therefore, it is very important to work on how one's voice sounds. Believe it or not, a smile comes through the phone, so smile when you answer the phone. For managers, it is important to have people who answer phone calls to have pleasant voice tones rather than harsh,

abrasive voices. Clarity of voice on the telephone is a key factor in customer satisfaction.

3. **32** When a customer calls, they may say things in ways that they would not say them in person. Sometimes language can be abusive or threats are sometimes made. Agency policy should direct employees on how to handle these special situations. I personally do not expect my customer service people to take verbal abuse. I instruct them to pleasantly tell the customer that they will be happy to help them, but they must stop using inappropriate language or making threats. If the customer continues to act in that manner, I allow the employee to hang up on them. Offering excellent customer service does not mean that employees must be doormats.
4. **33** If possible, have the phone answered by a real person. One of the chief complaints I hear is against our automated phone answering system. Many people, especially older ones, want to talk to a REAL person. If that is not financially possible, then a quick “out” from the automated system is appropriate. Most all of us have been subjected to “voice mail jail” that sends us from one area to another asking questions at each level. I have even had the automated system of a credit card company hang up on me after I answered half a dozen questions because I paused in my last answer. Nothing is more frustrating.
5. As with the customer who comes into the office, the employee must listen completely to the question the customer has. The employee should ask clarifying questions if necessary. Once the question is understood, the employee should be trained sufficiently to answer the question rather than transferring the customer to someone else where the entire explanation process must begin again. The key to this process is educating personnel to the highest level possible. There are always those very technical questions that will have to be referred, but the referrals should be the exception rather than the rule.
6. **35** Consider concluding your conversation with a question such as, “Have I answered your questions today?” Or “Is there anything else I can do for you today?” This will give the customer one more

opportunity if they have not understood the answers to their questions. For sure, if the customer thanks you for helping them, answer with “you’re welcome”- not “no problem” as we often hear in today’s society.

7. **37** When should employees return phone calls? With voice mail available for most agencies, the employee can postpone returning phone calls. That is never a good idea. Those phone calls have a way of building up to a point that they seem unmanageable. The employee can become paralyzed by the magnitude of the messages and the rest of his work. It is wise for all messages to be returned before the employee leaves for the day. Some agencies have a policy that return calls must be completed within 24 hours.

Dressing for Success and Respect 38

In my introductory story about the postal service, I commented on the lack of professional dress that I observed. As public servants, we are put under the microscope every day. There are those who look to find something that they don’t like. It is incumbent upon us to not give them extra ammunition to fuel their prejudice.

Dressing professionally makes a positive first impression with customers. A suit, neat dress pants and a sport coat, or at least a dress shirt and tie should be the expectation for a male employee. Women should be expected to look sharp as well, attired in a dress or a dress top and slacks. Appropriate clothing gives the customer the impression that the agency is professional. If they see T-shirts, jeans, flip-flops, cropped tops, or shorts, the impression is that the agency is not serious about what it does. Clothes and shoes should be clean and neat, regardless of the dress code in your agency. Even on casual days, clothes should exhibit a professional image.

Actions to Avoid

Here are a few ideas to ensure that the customer is not getting a negative message by an employee’s actions:

1. **39** Employees should never take personal calls while customers are waiting. [EXPANSION OF THESE IDEAS](#)
2. **40** Avoid looking at smart phone
3. **41** **Employees** should never continue office conversations while customers are waiting.
4. **42** Employees should never “chat” with co-workers in public view.
5. If several employees need to discuss work-related issues, the discussion should be done away from public view.
6. When customers are waiting for service, employees should not stand around watching. They should pitch in and help or return to their office if they cannot assist. **OR MOVE AWAY FROM THEIR WORKSTATION IF THEY ARE OFF DUTY**
7. **43** Employees should avoid food or drinks at work stations. It is rude to eat or drink while waiting on a customer unless you are willing to share with them. Also, food and drinks can damage sensitive computer equipment if spilled.
8. I suggest that employees keep personal cell phones away from a customer’s sight at all times and answer personal calls and texts on breaks only
9. **44** If an employee is waiting on a customer, the employee should avoid answering a ringing phone until the person standing in front of them is finished with their business. If an employee *must* answer the phone, he should put the call on hold and finish his customer before assisting the phone caller.

Recognizing Excellent Customer Service 45

All of us like a pat on the back when we do well. When an agency employee does a particularly good job with a difficult customer, it is a great idea to give them a verbal pat on the back. Managers who hear a good customer service interchange should complement the employee as soon as the opportunity is available. Also, peers should also complement one another when they recognize excellent customer service. These kinds of

supportive comments encourage the continued desire to provide that type of service. **Remember to compliment in public and criticize in private.**

When letters, customer comment cards, e-mails, or verbal contacts are received from customers touting the excellent customer service of an employee, it is a good idea to give that person credit with a personal note, brag on them in a staff meeting or write a congratulatory interoffice e-mail. An agency may want to recognize an employee monthly, quarterly, or annually and give a plaque or some time off or a cash incentive for excellent customer service. I would offer a warning about such an award as it can also cause some jealousy and dissention. Care should be taken to ensure that it does not become a popularity contest if employees make the selection. Typically, employees are the best judges of who excels in customer service and should have some input in who wins an award. However, I want to remind listeners that the best feedback on excellent customer service is immediately after it happens.

We will never win the “most popular” award

Handling the administration of government services will never be a popular job, and our agencies will never make the list of favorite places to shop, but we can make a difference in the way the public feels about us by always treating them with respect, being kind, being helpful, and truly acting like public servants. I hope this webinar has convinced you of the importance of excellent customer service and that you have received some ideas that you can use today. I encourage you to talk with your peers about the information and brainstorm together about the kinds of things that you can do in your office to make a difference. I believe you will be amazed by the outcome.

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