



Small Business Center

7 tips for excellent customer service

By [Jeff Wuorio](#)

In the business world, good customer service often isn't good enough anymore.

Here are seven ideas and tips to help your business establish and maintain an ongoing climate of service excellence.

1. Define what extraordinary really means.

It's an easy term to toss about, but knowing what exceptional service entails is essential to establishing the procedures and the mindset with which to achieve it. So, delineate what extraordinary means — is it lower price? Keeping appointments on time or making certain that telephone service reps always say "please" and "thank you"? By knowing precisely what is merely good enough — and what takes your business beyond that — you get a firm handle on what you need to do to hit that goal on a consistent basis.

For 1-800-Got-Junk? that means calling a customer to let them know that the van they're expecting is going to arrive on time.

"We pledge to arrive on time, in a clean shiny truck, with two friendly uniformed drivers — but so can anyone. What makes us unique is our truck crew will call the customer 15 minutes ahead of time, and let them know we're on time," says Christopher Bennett of the Vancouver, B.C., junk removal service. "This has a huge impact on the customer. Calling ahead sets exceptional expectations — even if we're running late, the customer appreciates the call in advance."

2. Ask if you're not sure.

Many companies may find it understandably difficult to genuinely pinpoint what extraordinary service really entails. So, do some legwork. Conduct focus groups with customers to see what they really value. Ask your complaint department, if you have one, to identify topics that are frequent targets of dissatisfaction. Often, you may find extraordinary translates to a holistic grouping of issues, not just one product or service.

"Often, being extraordinary means offering someone a truly exceptional experience," says Dr. Noelle Nelson, author of "The Power of Appreciation in Business." "The quality of something may be good, but it's the overall experience that will really define customer loyalty."

3. Allow your people to be extraordinary.

Saying you want extraordinary service and actually carrying it out is a tough nut without the necessary authority. One of the biggest challenges of providing a consistently top-drawer performance is shifting conditions — what's appropriate for one customer may not work with another. . For instance, one customer may be so dissatisfied that a partial refund may be in order. By contrast, other customers who are a bit less peeved may be happy with a problem solved without any sort of refund.

So, allow employees reasonable freedom of choice to read a situation and react accordingly. For instance, Nelson suggests giving employees a budgetary allotment which they can use, as needed, to address refunds or other unexpected costs associated with giving customers the benefit of the doubt. To illustrate: Southwest Airlines gives its telephone customer service reps the authority to OK refunds if a caller claims they didn't get the airfare they wanted. (The reps charge their own credit cards, then later get reimbursed.)

4. Share information.

If you run a retail business, business management tools, such as [Microsoft's Retail Management System](#), can be invaluable in tracking critical data, such as what items and services are selling particularly well. If you have that data, don't keep it a state secret. Sharing the information with your employees lets them know what's hitting on all cylinders. It also helps them promote these products or services to customers. "Sharing information with others is a really positive step," says Nelson.

In other words, don't keep critical customer information close to the vest. That holds true with businesses other than retail. For instance, [Microsoft Dynamics Customer Relationship Management](#) (CRM) software lets you share valuable information about clients and customers with your entire organization. Customer buying habits, particular needs, interests and other data can be stored in a central location and easily shared.

5. Share the commitment.

Nothing can prove more destructive to a commitment to extraordinary service than management for whom the concept is little more than lip service. Walk the walk by buying into that commitment just as much as you hope your people will. Make sure you reward top performance. Invest the time and expense in any sort of training that may help employees carry out and maintain high performance standards. Don't forget yourself and others in the front office. "Make sure that training takes in everyone, not just sales, marketing and other front line employees," says Karen Leland, author of "Customer Service for Dummies." "Training is an important part of creating a lifelong culture for service excellence since it helps build an understanding of the concept of service. And that means a top-down commitment. Leadership should set the tone for the entire effort."

6. Don't expect magic overnight.

Another potential hurdle to extraordinary service is the expectation that it's like flicking a light switch — on it goes, and everything's hunky dory.

Truth is, exceptional service takes time to take hold in an organization, particularly one with an array of people and departments. Give it enough time. Review performance every four to six months. (Here, data from Microsoft Retail Management Systems and other like products can be essential in quantifying progress.) "It's essential to stay the course so you can improve service ratings," says Elaine Berke, a Westport, Mass., consultant.

7. Expect snafus and react accordingly.

The road to top notch service is not without its bumps. Don't pretend they're not there. Rather, make them a part of the journey by acknowledging a slip up and, in so doing, recommitting to extraordinary performance. For example, if a customer receives the wrong item, don't stop at making sure they get the right one. Let the customer know that you're sorry for the mistake and build their confidence that it won't happen again. "Build customer loyalty, not just satisfaction," says Berke. "When you apologize for problems and really listen, you build a relationship."

