

Customer Service

Guidelines

For

The Bureau of Employment Programs



First Edition, 2002
WV Bureau of Employment Programs

Customer Bill Of Rights

Our customers have the right to be treated with courtesy and respect.

Our customers have the right to ask questions when they do not understand legal requirements or staff communications.

Our customers have the right to timely service when seeking service in person, by phone, or in writing.

Our customers have the right to expect accurate and efficient record keeping on our part.

Our customers have the right to receive service from knowledgeable, competent and cooperative staff.

Our customers have the right to complete, accurate, reliable information and feedback.

Our customers have the right to consistent and fair application of laws and rules.



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1. What Is Customer Service?



When asked to define customer service, most people get a puzzled, glazed look about them. You can't define it, they'll say. Or when pushed, they'll mutter something about being treated like you want to be treated or it's when you're made to feel at home.

Does customer service defy definition because it is so warm and fuzzy that it must be experienced rather than defined? Whatever it is, most people say they 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 feel it when we go to a restaurant and the staff's priority is with each other and not serving the meal. We sense it when we go into a governmental office to ask a question and end up being passed from line to line. These are examples of what customer service is NOT, rather than what it IS.

What is customer service? Customer service is more than answering the phone correctly, providing the correct information, or delivering the mail to the correct location — although these are important. True customer service means building or rebuilding an agency that combines all parts of an organization — purpose, process, and people — toward meeting the customer's needs.

Everyone is saying that it is impossible to have excellent customer service; there are too many variables. This is true only if you think inside the box. Excellent customer service requires thinking outside the lines we have drawn around us. No one purposely imposed these lines. They are today's status quo. At one time, it was impossible to instantly send messages, receive calls anywhere and to break the speed of sound. Now they are possible, just like excellent customer service. Think about it.

There is no such thing as overnight results, magic bullets or quick fixes. Providing excellent customer service starts with a commitment from the top and flows throughout the agency. In a quality customer service agency, employees know the customer is the reason for the organization's existence. Delivering excellent customer service is a never-ending search, as is thinking outside of the box.

Who Are Your Customers?

Identifying customers isn't always easy, especially for agencies with more than one mission. To identify your specific customers, ask yourself the following questions:

Who does business with your agency? Who receives a benefit, information, or has an interest in how your agency conducts its business? Once you have answered these questions, you have identified your customers. In government, we must realize our customers are the reason we are employed. They are the taxpayers who we serve. Without the taxpayers, we would not have a job. It is our job to provide them with the services we are hired to perform. In your daily job performance, you will have two different types of customers — external and internal.

External customers are those people or departments who are the end users of our organization's services. Often, we call these people different names depending on our business. We call them customers, clients, claimants, constituents and the like.

To keep things simple, the generic term of customer is used throughout. But please keep in mind, you probably serve a number of different customers on a daily basis.

Internal customers are those people, departments or organizations served by what you do. Everyone has at least one internal customer. Even managers have customers. His or her boss and supervisors are a few examples of people relying on managers to meet their needs.

Why Bother? We Are A State Agency

“As a government agency, why should we care if Mr. Jones is unhappy with the way we handled his problem? We deal with thousands of people each day. What is one unhappy customer to me? After all, I know what I am doing and he just does not understand how government works.” Does this sound familiar? Unfortunately, this is the perception that the public sometimes has of state government.

What Is A Satisfied Customer?

Satisfied customers are those who receive value from the services you offer. We provide a service that customers cannot get anywhere else. We may have a “captive customer,” but this does not give us free rein to ignore customers or treat them badly. As an employee of the Bureau, you must be accountable to your customers by meeting their needs and deadlines — not yours.

The Governor’s Office is committed to providing customer service at all levels of state government. “Our customers, the taxpayers, deserve the best service we can offer.” -- Governor Bob Wise.

Why give good service if the “customer” has no choice but to deal with you? Do we truly know who the person is on the other end of the communication? Is she a CEO of a company that may wish to stay in West Virginia? Is he a person who handles location decisions for a company that is considering opening a business in West Virginia? The treatment we give each customer has a long-term effect on the state of West Virginia. If we want to change how others perceive this state, we must start with our own attitudes. If we wish to remain here, have our children stay here, then we must begin today to lift up the attitudes of what people think about West Virginia. Each customer must be treated as you would want to be treated.

Cause And Effect Of Customer Service

In government agencies, customer displeasure with service quickly becomes customer animosity. This animosity can snowball. Some results of this stress on employees and the organization include:

- Increased stress-related illness;
- Employee burnout and absenteeism;
- Higher employee turnover;
- Cost and inconvenience of training replacement employees;
- Increased difficulty in attracting new employees to the job;
- Negative public view of the organization;
- Lower sense of pride in organization;
- Lower sense of self-worth among employees; and
- Increased defensiveness in employees, which can lead to even more stress.

Agencies that treat customers generously can reap an unexpected dividend — higher morale among employees.



2. Getting Off To A Good Start

Before we even begin, there are certain phrases and attitudes we must avoid.

Forbidden phrases may include:

"I don't know."

It sounds as if you're closing the door on the caller or that you're not sure what's going on in your own office. It is better to say, "That's a good question. Let me check and find out."

"No, ..."

When "No" begins any sentence, it sounds as though you're not willing to help. You may not be able to do one thing, but you can do something. "We aren't able to do that, but we can ..." (Because there's always something you can do.)

"That's not my job ..."

When you begin a sentence with this, it sounds as though you are not sure what your job is. Tell the customer "I am not sure I know the answer to your request, but I will find someone who does."

"That's not my fault."

Try saying, "Let's see what we can do about this." Accept responsibility even if you did not make the mistake. In the customer service game, the bottom line is not who did what. Just fix it.

"You want it when?"

Always give a specific window of time when you can meet the customer's needs. Tell the customer you will try to meet their deadline, and assure them you are working on their problem.

"Call me back."

Never tell a customer to call you back. This is a brush off. Always tell the customer that you will call them back as soon as possible. Then follow promptly follow through.

"We can't do that."

This sentence is extremely negative. Be positive. Try saying, "That's a tough one. Let's see what we can do." You may not be able to meet the request, but in the eyes and ears of the customer, you are willing to try. There may be some other service you can try that the customer is not familiar with.

"You'll have to ..."

This sounds accusatory. Try saying instead, "Here's how we can help you." Give the customer detailed instructions on how to file a claim, request information, or just answer their questions.



First Contact: The Front Line — It May Be Up To You

The front line team makes all of the difference. The customer game is ultimately won or lost on the front lines — where the customer comes in contact with the employees. The front line team is the company in the customers' eyes. Therefore, the front line team must see themselves as the heroes they genuinely are. Management must support them with the tools (training and equipment) needed to serve the customer heroically.

Telephone Etiquette

"I don't want a busy signal or to be put on hold when I call. I want accurate and courteous service from the first person I talk to, without needing to talk to several other people during the call. I want and deserve better service from my government." -- A West Virginia Taxpayer

Most often, the telephone is the first point of contact. It is imperative that when the telephone rings the following MUST TAKE PLACE:

There is a proper etiquette for telephone conversations. Because a person's first impression of you or the West Virginia Bureau of Employment Programs (BEP) may be from a conversation, it is important to adhere to the conventions of proper telephone etiquette.

Here are a few basic rules to help anyone who answers the phone:

- Smile when you talk. Can you hear a smile? You bet! A cheery disposition on your end of the telephone line is likely to head off gruffness from a caller who has a complaint.
- Identify yourself, office, or organization in a few words. Try as quickly as possible to learn with whom you are speaking.
- Maintain a cheerful and considerate attitude toward each telephone caller. A caller usually can recognize if you seem bored. This is discourteous and paints a poor image of you and BEP.
- Use the telephone properly. Keep your lips about ½ to 1 inch from the mouthpiece. Pronounce letters, numbers, and names clearly. Spell out names if they could be misunderstood.
- Return calls. If you must leave the telephone during a conversation and won't be able to return immediately, say that you will call back and then follow through.
- Say "good-bye" pleasantly and replace the receiver gently. The person making the call should end the conversation.

Putting A Customer On Hold

When it becomes necessary to place a customer on hold, you must follow these steps:

- Ask the caller's permission before placing them on hold. Provide them with the benefits of being placed on hold.
- Wait for a response. If they say no, offer to call them back. There are a number of reasons they may not wish to be placed on hold. They may be on a cell phone or have an appointment they need to attend. (If the caller is disgruntled, follow the steps in dealing with complaint calls.)
- Give a time frame. (If your estimate is too short, return to the line and tell them that it is going to take a little longer and ask them if you can call back.)
- Thank customers for holding after you return to the line.

Transferring Calls

Customers hate to repeat themselves to different people over and over. If you determine that your customer/caller needs to speak with someone else, you must follow these steps:

- Explain why you are transferring their call.
- Ask the customer/caller if they object to being transferred.
- Give the customer the name and phone number of the individual to whom the call is being transferred.
- Make sure someone is there to pick up the call before you hang up.
- Tell the person to whom you are transferring the call the caller's name and the nature of the call.

If the caller does not wish to be transferred, offer to take a message and assure the caller/customer that you will personally see that the right person gets the message. After you hang up, **MAKE SURE THAT YOU DELIVER THE MESSAGE** to the proper person.

Taking Messages

There will be times when **YOU MUST** take a message.

ALWAYS follow these steps:

- Always record the date and time of the call.
- Always spell back the callers first and last names. Everyone should know how to spell Smith or Jones, but Zitzelsberger may give you some problems.
- Always write a brief explanation of what the caller wanted.
- **ALWAYS** deliver the message.

If you must take a message for a co-worker, briefly explain that the co-worker is out of the office and when they are expected to return. **NEVER GIVE OUT PERSONAL INFORMATION ABOUT EMPLOYEES.** If the co-worker is going to be out for more than one day, management should provide a backup for that employee. If applicable, you can ask them if they would like the employee's voice mail. (It is a common belief that all companies should answer their own phones. Voice mail should only be a tool that employees can use as a detailed message center.)

Voice Mail

Voice mail is an office tool that appears to be here to stay. Like all office tools, this one can work to your advantage. Customers can leave you detailed messages that you can address before returning their call. Once a caller leaves a message, you must return their call. Voice mail cannot be an obstacle to your customers. Voice mail allows customers to know that you are not available, but that you will receive the message.

All branches have their own policy and procedures concerning voice mail usage. You must follow those procedures. The following steps are general guidelines to voice mail usage:

- You should NEVER use voice mail to avoid talking with your customers.
- Calls should be returned within 24 hours.
- Always answer your phone when you are sitting at your desk (when you are not with another customer or in a meeting).
- If an employee will be out of the office for more than a few hours, their message should reflect that.
- Provide an escape route. There is nothing worse than getting trapped in voice mail. Your system must be user friendly!
- There should always be a number or option to contact another employee if the customer desires. If the caller does not wish to be transferred to voice mail, TAKE A MESSAGE.

Tone Of Voice When Voice Is All You've Got

Almost the entire message you project to your customer over the phone is communicated through your tone of voice. Your tone reveals what you think and feel. More than words, your tone lets a caller know how you feel.

Also, pay attention to your vocal quality, consisting of rate, pitch, volume, clarity, and tone. Is your voice rate too fast or too slow? Fast talkers come across as untrustworthy or too busy to talk. Callers may think of slow talkers as mentally slow.

Pitch is the highness or lowness of your voice. High-pitched talkers tend to grate on people's nerves, while low-pitched talkers sound mechanical, almost robotic.

Volume is how loud or soft you talk. Loud people are perceived as brash, overbearing; soft speakers are seen as shy, whimpy.

Clarity takes in how your words are understood. Do you articulate your words, or do you slur them together? Avoid dropping end consonants ("droppin'" for "dropping") or mispronouncing words ("git" for "get").

Lastly, tone is the expressiveness in your voice. It makes up 38 percent of the communication message, so make it count. Be expressive.

To project good phone manners, when the phone rings, be ready. Be prepared to talk. Give your attention to the caller — the customer. Set aside whatever you are doing and focus on what the caller is saying. LISTEN to what they are asking. Paraphrase their comments so you understand what the caller means. Interact and verbally encourage the caller. Summarize the conversation to clear up any areas of misunderstanding. Although the caller can't see them, use body gestures. Gestures allow you to be more expressive, more animated in your conversation. Ask clarifying questions.

Body Language

There are times that “Our actions can speak louder than our words.” Your ability to project positive body language to your customers will help make positive impressions. Although body language is not an exact science, there are rules that apply.

Make eye contact. When you are dealing with a customer, be sure to make eye contact with them, but do not stare at your customer. This will make them feel that you are paying attention to them and also will make sure they hear what you have to say. It’s difficult to hear someone if they are not looking at you when they speak.

Appear friendly! Even if you are having a bad day, there is no need to take it out on your customer. Smile and try to help in a friendly way.

Pay attention to the customer. Be sure to give the customer your full attention when you are assisting them. Do not ever talk on the phone when helping someone else.

Your facial expressions will let everyone know what type of mood you are in. Be courteous. Smile, even if it hurts. Always be polite and courteous to your customers.

To let a customer know that you are listening and concerned with what they are telling you, you should nod to allow the customer to know you are listening. Also, face the customers with your entire body to show them they have your undivided attention.

Another part of body language is neatness. How we look has a big impact on how people perceive us. Our customers expect us to look professional on the job.

The neatness of our work area is important if your customers see it. If your desk is piled high with papers, files, messages and clutter, customers will assume you’re slow and will inefficiently deal with their problem. If storage space is an issue, meet with customers in another area.

3. Communication



Telling Customers About Your Agency

Every communication between you and your customers is an opportunity to let them know you're sincerely interested in their complaints and comments. Although it's sometimes hard to accept, you want your customers to know you welcome the chance to fix their problems. Always follow a few simple steps when dealing with a new customer or a new claim:

- Customers should know their rights and responsibilities from the beginning.
- Their rights and responsibilities must be written in simple-to-follow instructions.
- Customers should be encouraged to tell you about any problems.
- Customers should know the circumstances under which they are entitled to benefits and how to take advantage of other rights.
- Customers — not you — should feel in control. It's far better to follow agency guidelines and time lines and to provide a full range of services if the customer is dissatisfied than to demand that the customer come up with a good reason for needing their benefits.
- All responses and requests for responses, or any other recourse you offer, **MUST** be prompt.
- All customers have basic needs. They expect to be treated friendly. All you need to do to meet this need is politely greet and be courteous to your customer.
- Customers expect you to understand and to have empathy. Customers need to believe you understand and appreciate their circumstances without being critical or judgmental. Often this consists of little more than committing yourself to meeting interim deadlines.

You must give your customers the benefit of the doubt. The key to exceptional customer service/satisfaction lies not in meeting expectations, but in exceeding them.



4. Cyberspace — Star Trek Is Here

Managing E-mail

One of the biggest problems we face today is handling large quantities of information. Our technology and access to information is impressive, but it's a double-edged sword. It fills our minds and our lives with clutter.

The challenge is to sort, filter, organize, discard and assimilate the massive amounts of data we're exposed to on a daily basis.

1. Reply.

Most messages you receive will require a

simple and straightforward answer. If you need to do some research, let the person know. Keep the message in your inbox, so it will remind you to follow up and follow through.

2. Forward To The Appropriate Person.

If you receive something that you cannot address, or is abusive or threatening, forward it to the appropriate person. Also, let the sender know you have forwarded their request and that the person will contact them in the near future.

3. Don't Check Mail Every Few Minutes.

This is a tough one, but it's much more efficient and you'll stay more focused on your current work if you're not constantly checking for new mail. Being responsive to customers and co-workers should always be your top priority. However, it is easy to become a slave to your e-mails. If you have an alert that tells when you receive an e-mail — **TURN THIS OFF**. It only breaks your concentration and creates interruptions. With the direct Internet connection and your e-mail delivered automatically, you can still wait to respond every two hours or so. By assigning a specific time to read and reply to e-mails, you'll gain efficiency.

4. Use Folders.

GroupWise allows you to create folders and subfolders to sort your mail. This makes finding messages much easier. Develop a plan that works for you. You may want to move messages to folders that are labeled A.S.A.P. and Tomorrow. This allows you to address the e-mails that are urgent versus the e-mails that can wait.

5. Set Up Rules.

Once you know what works best for you, follow the rules and guidelines you set.

6. Deal With Similar Responses.

By sorting your mail using the methods described above, you can deal with similar messages at once. You save time by not having to look up the same information over again.

7. Use Templates.

Create templates in Microsoft Word and use them. They will save you time for those responses that require the same or similar information on a regular basis.

8. Cut, Copy, Paste.

One of the most powerful features of today's computer operating systems and office software is the ability to cut and paste information, to transfer it from one document to another. Save the typing time. Copy from other documents and paste into e-mail. If you don't know how to use this feature, learn today. You'll wonder how you survived without it.

9. Make Heavy Use Of The Delete Key.

Hardly anything can free up your inbox more than deleting e-mail you don't want. Hitting the delete key on your keyboard is the best way to dump unwanted messages.

10. Save E-Mails On Your Hard Drive Or On Paper.

This is not to say that you must save every message. It would be a good practice to save e-mails as a backup to requests. When the file is closed, you can delete the e-mail.

E-Mail Etiquette

"It's e-mail, it doesn't matter how it sounds, or if it is misspelled ... it is just e-mail." --Today's Office Worker

If this is you, then it is easy to see you do not care how you present yourself to your customers or to your co-workers. Your e-mails are a reflection of your communication skills and professionalism.

Here are a few tips to help you when sending e-mails:

- Always have a clear title in the subject line.
- Always write a greeting. Dear _____ should be standard on every e-mail.
- Avoid using abbreviations. You may know what T.P.A. means; however, the average customer on the street does not.
- Avoid cyber gossip. Limit the number of people you forward or cc on messages. Only the people involved in the request should receive a courtesy copy.
- ALWAYS SPELL CHECK, PUNCTUATION AND GRAMMAR CHECK YOUR E-MAILS. GroupWise allows you to set spell check before you send. Please check and turn this feature on.
- Avoid using all caps. In the cyber world this means you are yelling.
- Always close the end of your e-mail. Sign your name and title. GroupWise allows you to do this automatically.
- Use correct grammar and avoid rambling. It is important you always use proper grammar and paragraph formatting, avoid run on sentences and avoid repeating yourself.
- Make your requests clear and understandable. Clear requests will get the fastest response. Make it easy for the reader to figure out what you need and when you need it.
- Never send an e-mail written when you're upset. Always compose yourself before composing your e-mails.

5. Dealing With Difficult People



Sometimes despite your best efforts to treat a customer fairly, a dispute starts to get out of hand. At that point you must bring in your supervisor or other respected third party.

There are times when we must draw the line between upset customers with legitimate problems and chronic complainers who can consume our time with unreasonable demands.

How to Handle Customer Complaints

Complaint callers who are irate are really saying, “I rate.” They have bought into society’s “the squeaky wheel gets the grease.” When that happens, try the following:

- Be understanding with the caller.
- Apologize and acknowledge the problem.
- Accept responsibility.

Be understanding with the caller. This is different from sympathy, where you take on someone else’s problem. Try to understand how the person is feeling.

Apologize and acknowledge the problem. You don’t have to agree with the caller, but express regret that there is a problem. People want to be heard, and no one’s complaint is trivial. Each deserves prompt handling, so do not deal with it in a trivial manner.

Accept responsibility. Make sure something is done. Take it upon yourself to DO something. Many times, that’s all people want: the reassurance that something will be done. People want to be helped. They want to know that you care. Use these phrases to get that sentiment across: “How can I help you?”, “What can I do for you?” or “I’ll make sure this message/information gets to the right person.”

The acceptance of responsibility may be as simple as forwarding the call to the appropriate individual or sending the caller more information. If you do forward the caller to someone else on your staff, follow up with that person to make sure the caller was taken care of.

First, don’t overreact, especially if the caller starts using “trigger” words or phrases, such as: “I want to talk to someone who knows something.” Most people respond by getting defensive when their “hot-button words” are pressed. Remember, a positive attitude is the most important asset you have.

Second, listen completely to the complaint. Allow the caller the opportunity to vent some frustration. When you listen, don’t try to apply logic to the situation. Many people are beyond logic if they are angry, so accept the feelings being expressed. Avoid argument and criticism.

Third, do not blame anyone — the caller, yourself, or someone on your staff — even if you know who is to blame for a problem. This information should not be shared with the caller.

Fourth, paraphrase the caller's comments, and ask questions if you do not understand the information being presented to you. Restate the problem, as you understand it.

Fifth, offer solutions and, if appropriate, offer alternatives. Providing alternatives empowers callers. It gives callers a feeling that they were not dictated to and that they were part of the solution.

Finally, confirm the solution with the caller. Make sure the caller agrees with what has been decided. Of course, not everyone will be happy, no matter what you do. These people will not be content; they just like being grumpy. Usually, these are the people who want to talk to the person "above you." If that is what it takes to lessen their anger, then do so. By the time they have been transferred to a supervisor, they usually have become calmer and less demanding. It seems that they just needed to vent their anger at someone —you. Just remember that most people are not that way and keep a firm grip on your positive attitude.

Swearers

There is one small group of irate callers that has to be addressed here: the swearer. You may not get swearers very often, but when you do, how do you handle them? Here are a couple of suggestions:

First, call attention to the swearer's vulgar language by saying, "Sir/madam, I can handle your problem, but I am not able to handle the swearing. I respectfully ask that you stop." In most instances, making callers aware of what they are saying will halt the swearing. However, if it does not stop, tell the caller that you do not need to listen to swearing. Let them know that you are transferring their call to a supervisor. If your supervisor is not available, tell the caller that you are going to hang up and let them know that you are willing to help them when they are calmer. No one should have to listen to verbal abuse.

6. You Must Remember This

These are basic habits you can develop to achieve a consistently high level of customer service.

Be On Time.

Being on time is a statement of respect.

Follow up on your promises.

You must follow up on your promises. If you tell someone you will get back to him or her before the end of the day—Just Do It.

Go the extra mile.

Make going out of your way a way of life—people remember the small things.

Treat your customers as the Most Important Part of Your Job.

NEVER SAY

I don't know.
No.
That's not my job.
That's not my fault.
You want it by when?
Call me back.
We can't do that.
You'll have to ...

DO SAY

I will find out.
What I can do is ...
This is who can help you ...
Let's see what we can do about this.
I will try my best.
I will call you back.
That's a tough one; let's see what I can do.
Here's how we can help you.



