

Video Transcript

Customer Service Fundamentals – Actively Listening to Customers by Learn Soft Skill

Customers aren't always great at describing exactly what they need. Sometimes they tell rambling stories, other times they asked for one thing when they really mean another. They can get confused, hurried, frustrated, irritated or even silly. Understanding your customers' needs require listening with your full attention.

Here are a few techniques that can help:

- Face your customer directly and make eye contact. It makes it easier to listen to your customer and lets them know you are focused on them.
- Concentrate on blocking out distractions. You might serve customers in an environment where there's a lot of activity going on, this can make it hard to stay focused on the person you're serving unless you really concentrate.
- Ask clarifying questions. The answers will help you get the information you need to serve your customer.
- Paraphrase to confirm understanding. You can avoid misunderstandings by recapping what you heard and checking with your customer to make sure that's what they meant.

Listening to customers over the phone can be even more challenging because you can't see them and they can't see you. One technique that can help is to use common visual references. For example, if a customer is looking at your company's website you can navigate to the same page so you're both looking at the same thing.

Serving customers via email doesn't technically involve listening but it's still important to pay close attention to what your customer needs. We get so many emails throughout the day that there's a natural tendency to skim and scan messages. This approach can be dangerous because it may cause you to miss an important part of the message. A way to avoid this is to slow down and think carefully about what your customer is asking. It may seem counterintuitive but you can actually serve customers via email more efficiently by slowing down just a little bit. Hastily written emails that don't answer all of our customers questions often result in the customer sending a second email. This takes extra time. On the other hand, a thorough, well-written message is much less likely to require an additional response. Here's an example from a customer trying to find the schedule for his favorite team so he could buy tickets to a game'...

Dear Customer Service,

Can you send me the schedule of games so I can decide what tickets to buy? I searched your website but couldn't find it.

Thanks,

Jack

Susan responded with...

Dear Jack,

Thank you for your email. Attached is last season's schedule.

Jack sent back this message...

Unless I invent a time machine it will be pretty hard to buy tickets to last season's games. I'm looking for the schedule for the upcoming season.

Susan responded again with...

Oh sorry. Next season's schedule isn't out yet.

Jack had to send another email...

So, Susan when will the schedule be out?

Finally, Susan responded with...

Next season's schedule will be published in two weeks.

By not paying careful attention to what Jack was asking, Susan, the customer service rep needed three emails to respond to Jack's question instead of just one. Here's how Susan could have responded...

Dear Jack,

Thank you for your email. We're glad you're thinking of coming to a few games. Next season's schedule is due out in two weeks and you'll be able to purchase tickets once it's published. I've included a link at the bottom of this email that you can use to sign up for our email newsletter. That way you'll be notified right away when the schedule is out and tickets go on sale. Please let me know if there's anything else you need in the meantime.

Here's one last act of listening tip that can really take service to that next level. Try to identify your customers' unspoken needs. One of my favorite examples comes from the transportation and parking office on a college campus. The campus gets thousands of visitors every day and not everyone knows their way around. Customer service employees are trained to notice that "I'm lost look" and proactively offer directions. They even carry small maps of the campus that they can use to show pedestrians where a building is or show drivers where to find parking. This fulfills the customer's rational need of finding where they're going but it also prevents visitors from negative emotions associated with getting lost such as frustration or anxiousness.

Here are two activities you can try to develop your active listening skills.

The first activity works from serving customers in person or over the phone. The next time a customer makes a request try paraphrasing and confirm your understanding. Your customer won't know you're doing this activity but you'll know you've got it right when they tell you, "Yes that's what I need". If you're on the phone you might even find it helpful to take a few notes. The second activity involves spotting an unspoken need much like the customer service reps who hand out maps to people visiting the college campus. Over the next week try to identify or anticipate as many unspoken customer needs as you can. Customers consistently rate helpfulness as one of the top components of service quality. Taking the time to actively listen to customers and understand each individual's unique rational and emotional needs can allow you to be extraordinarily helpful to the people you serve.