Creative Customer Service

With summer almost here, now is a good time to make sure all your systems are in place and operating properly so that you can provide seamless, creative customer service.

What's creative customer service?

Creative customer service means understanding what customers need, anticipating what would help and finding useful ways to deliver it.

Behind the scenes, your bookings, stock information, opening hours and staffing need to support that service. Your team also needs to know who handles problems and what they can sort out themselves.

This will help keep your customers happy and your team feeling more satisfied.

Staff training is just the beginning

It's not enough to just train your staff. They also need to be empowered. It's not good customer service if they constantly have to refer back to the owner of the business before they can deliver on a customer request. The staff need to know what they can decide without asking permission.



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All your team should be encouraged to be proactive: to look beyond the customer's immediate needs to what else they can do to provide a service customers will rave about. That's easier to act on when people know what authority they have. Otherwise they're left guessing how creative their boss will allow them to be.

Word-of-mouth advertising is priceless and frequently results in repeat business as well as referrals to others.

Think of the customer experience before they even arrive

This is often the biggest gap. Customer service starts when someone tries to find out whether you're open, book an appointment or get an answer.

- Are your opening hours and contact details accurate in all the places a customer might look?
- Do you have clear prices, booking instructions and information about what's available?
- Are messages answered within the time you've promised?
- Do you let customers know about delays before they have to ask?

These are useful things for local businesses to check before summer.

What about when things go haywire?

Creativity is particularly useful when the original plan has fallen over. Listen carefully, check that you understand the problem and acknowledge the inconvenience. Then offer workable options and do what you've agreed.



Where possible, one person should handle the situation. Being passed from one person to another and having to repeat the whole story again each time is likely to add to a customer's frustration. If a staff member needs to get someone with more authority to handle the situation, they should fully brief the senior person so the customer doesn't have to repeat the problem. Most of us have experienced a phone call where we've explained the problem so many times we could deliver it as a one-person show.

It's about putting yourself in the customer's shoes

Engaging your customers in a conversation will often reveal ways that you could add a little extra through actions that are simple and proportionate. Thinking laterally about the problem they're trying to solve could assist you in coming up with suggestions that would make your customers' lives easier. Asking yourself questions will help you think through useful ways to be creative with customer service.



Choose a couple of these to discuss with your team

- What is this customer actually trying to achieve?
- Have I asked what would help, or am I assuming?
- What could make this easier for them?
- What would you do if this person was your friend and you wanted to help?
- How could you be more generous without it costing you money?
- How would you like your elderly mother or aunt to be treated?

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- What else could I do for this customer?
- Is there a way I could follow up to make sure the customer is happy?
- If you're the boss, how can you 'go the extra mile' for your staff, so you're demonstrating the behaviour you desire?
- If I can't provide what they need, can I suggest someone who can?

That last question is particularly important in our small community. You can't be all things to all people, but you can help visitors to find what they're looking for if you're unable to provide it.

Asking these types of questions will help you be creative in your customer service delivery. Encourage your team to share the solutions customers appreciated. Someone else may be able to use or adapt the same idea.

Every customer is different

Just as you like to be treated as an individual, so do your customers. Some people like to pay and leave, others like to chat. Recognising the difference is also part of good customer service.

Remember the locals



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When you're flat out looking after visitors to our town, it's easy to overlook the locals who give you their custom all year round. A friendly greeting, using their name if you know it, asking how they're doing and listening to the answer, all help them feel seen and acknowledged.

One thing to fix before summer

Ask the team where customers regularly get confused, delayed or frustrated, then choose one thing to fix before the summer rush.

About the author: Stephanie Philp is a Raglan-based Human Change Specialist and founder of Inside Your Mind Ltd. She helps individuals and organisations communicate more effectively, change unhelpful patterns and make progress towards what matters to them.

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