



When to say thanks

The New Year is a good time to reflect on all of those customers and coworkers who have helped you throughout the year, and to be on the lookout for occasions for a sincere “thank you,” says Andrea Nierenberg of the Nierenberg Group. Here are some of her suggestions:

- When customers write a testimonial to your supervisor about you. Take the time to say thank you.
- When you’re offered comments or suggestions. It’s a wonderful gift when someone gives you a suggestion or comment on how you might do something better or different.
- When customers try something you recommended. When customers buy into something new based on your suggestion, they’re going out of their “comfort zone.” This calls for a note that reads, “Thank you for your trust in me.”
- When customers recommend you or your company. This is the best form of advertising a company can ever get. Take the time to go back to your advocate, and say, “Thanks for referring me.” **TCC**

Learn to take advantage of the “Power of Pause”

With the busy pace in most customer service centers, and with the time-oriented performance metrics that many customer service reps face, it might seem counterintuitive to recommend that reps take ample time to pause occasionally during customer interactions. But according to Nance Guilmartin, author of *The Power of Pause: How to Become More Effective in a Demanding, 24/7 World*, taking time to pause can help save time in the long run by humanizing customer interactions, avoiding automatic responses, defusing angry customers, and giving reps time to better understand the underlying needs of customers.

This is particularly true when the customer is calling about a problem or something that needs fixing or correcting. “The first thing reps can do when they are listening to somebody who is complaining or venting is to literally take a deep breath,” Guilmartin says. “And use that pause to get in touch with whatever it is that this person is going through, even if you have heard it many times before. If you don’t, if you respond without pausing, then your response will come across as automatic. And if you fail to respond to the caller as a person first, rather than as a problem, then the caller is more likely to become defensive and even offensive.”

A simple pause, on the other hand, gives the rep a chance to get his or her bearings, adopt a more helpful mindset, and avoid providing an automatic (and perhaps unhelpful) response.

Pause to make a connection

And a pause doesn’t necessarily mean a silence. In fact, adding a few words to acknowledge the pain or difficulty that a customer is having will go a long way toward calming the customer and putting the rep more in control of the call. “Just finding a simple phrase or sentence to acknowledge what the person is going through — without trying to figure out the solution right away — will allow the customer to feel that you are connecting to them from a place of humanity, rather than just functionality,” Guilmartin says.

Even if it is a problem that you have heard often and handled effectively before — you should take the time to pause. “If you don’t stop to appreciate the fact that you don’t really know what this customer is going

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through, you will start thinking that you know the answer faster than the customer is ready to hear it,” says Guilmartin.

Instead, she says, pause and try saying something like, “Let me see if this would help,” or “When we have had situations like this before, here is what has helped.”

Whatever the phrase you use, however, Guilmartin warns reps to be careful that their tone is not too curt or dismissive. “When you give a customer the solution or the data they need in a way that sounds as if you are just trying to get them off the phone, that can feel dismissive and undermine what you are trying to accomplish,” she says.

An effective pause will slow things down and help the customer to realize that it is not them against you. It shifts the conversation from a you versus me to a we — i.e., “Let me see if we can do this.”

Pause to stay focused

A pause can also help when the customer seems to be going on and on or seems to be going off track.

“If someone is going on and on, you can indicate that by taking a deep breath — so they know that you are there — and saying, ‘Can I stop you right there for a moment? This is really important. Let me make sure that I am with you so far. And if I am not, please correct me,’” Guilmartin says. Then paraphrase briefly what the customer has said to make sure you are following. For instance: “So far, this is what I think I am hearing ...” Or, “What you seem to be saying is this ...” And summarize what the problem is, what the customer wants, or what didn’t work out the way it was supposed to. “But do it without suggesting any sort of blame or culpability,” says Guilmartin.

“Sometimes all you can do is take a deep breath to let them know that you are there, and

How do you know it’s time to pause?

It’s time for a pause, says Nance Guilmartin, author of *The Power of Pause*, when any of the following occur during a conversation with a customer:

- The customer is aggressive and in a hurry, and you’re being pushed to respond quickly.
- Something the customer says doesn’t make sense.
- You realize that you and the customer are not on the same page.
- You find yourself making premature assumptions about what the customer’s problem is.
- You find yourself taking something the customer says personally.
- You disagree with what the customer is saying.
- You’re not focusing on what the customer is saying.

maybe add, ‘Gosh, I hate to interrupt you, and I know you have more to the story, but can I just make sure that I am with you so far?’” Guilmartin says. “It’s a sign that you are listening and that you know that it’s overwhelming.”

She adds: “Anything that resembles a human, sincere response can disarm an angry customer. Not all of the time, but many times — as long as it doesn’t feel like a technique.”

Pause to maintain control

If a customer service person has a tone that is fast and aggressive and doesn’t allow for pauses, then the customer is more likely to become more aggressive. “And the faster someone is talking and the more they push, explain, and pile on information without pausing, the more anxious, aggravated, and agitated the customer is going to get,” says Guilmartin. So tone, and pace, and the occasional pause are important tools to keep any type of customer conversation under control.

But remember, the pause isn’t just a period of silence after the customer makes a demand or asks a question — there has to be something going on at the rep’s end to make a personal connection, to find out more about the

situation, or just to establish a rapport with the customer so that the transaction or conversation goes forward just a bit more smoothly.

But it has to sound sincere. “If the customer service person starts immediately asking questions, that can make a customer feel that he is being interrogated and he can become defensive,” Guilmartin says. “And when you offer a solution, there has to be a conditionality about it, so you don’t seem to be shoving something at the customer, so you don’t make the customer feel you are dismissing him or her with an assumption-driven answer.”

Guilmartin suggests pausing to add a few prefatory words: “Let me see if I understand your question...” or “May I ask you a few questions first...” or “Sometimes in this situation, this is what we do.”

“So don’t be in a rush to dispatch every call as quickly as possible, because it might actually cost you more time in three ways,” says Guilmartin. “One, you might rush through and leave the customer thinking that the problem is solved when it really isn’t. Two, they are going to be even angrier when they find out about it and have to call back. And three, they may not call back, they may just stop being a customer.” **TCC**

To be noticed, do more than is expected

What does it take to be successful in any organization? Alan Zimmerman, a personal performance speaker and trainer, suggests that any answer to that question should contain the word “initiative.” “It’s such a key component of success that I would wager to say you’ll never be successful without it,” he says.

But how do you get it and keep it? Zimmerman offers these two suggestions.

Do more than you are asked to do ... and do more than is expected. “The person who only does what he is told to do will never be asked to do great things,” Zimmerman says. And he adds, by corollary, “Folks who never do more than what they get paid for never get paid for any more than they do.”

Discipline yourself to keep on keeping on. “You pay a price for not keeping on or letting your initiative take a break,” says Zimmerman. He adds, quoting NCAA basketball coach Pat Summitt: “Discipline yourself so no one else has to.”

In good times, it’s easy to think, “Why bother with the extra effort?” And in bad times it’s easy to think, “What’s the use? My extra effort isn’t going to help.” But both of those ways of thinking will get in the way of success in any organization, says Zimmerman. “If you want to get somewhere, you’ve got to either get behind and push or get in front and pull. Standing aside won’t get you anywhere.”

His action prescription for boosting initiative and success in your organization: “Find two things that you can do at work in the next week that are more than is expected of you, and then do them.”

www.drzimmerman.com

TCC



Ask the Panel

How can I trim handle time without losing customers?

“Average handle time is a big deal in our service center. Can you suggest ways to reduce call handle time without shortchanging the customer?”

Be prepared

If your company has “guides” that can be accessed via the Internet, sent via fax or email, you can provide these to customers without keeping them on the phone. The guides might provide procedures to follow or answers to frequently asked questions with the answers. This enables the representative to provide the assistance to the customer, without staying on the phone and holding up other calls. But always ask the customer if she has any more questions and assure her that you are ready to help with any questions or concerns in the future.

When a customer call back is required because the customer needs to provide more information, make sure to list all the information the customer needs to provide. If the customer can gather everything and call back, that makes the second call smoother, and minimizes the chances of missing information on that second call.

Tara Howton, ASA, LLC

Know your options

A confident rep who is properly trained will almost always be more efficient when handling calls. But if you continually need to jump through hoops and get approval for the smallest customer request, call times will skyrocket and first call resolution numbers will decline. Ask your manager or team leader if there is more that you can do on your own for certain types of repetitive calls.

Another way to reduce call times is to offer as much information as possible through alternative avenues, so make sure that you know all of the automated or online options that your company offers. For instance, can you refer customers to your company website for order forms, contact information, and policies so that they can get things on their own?

Stacey Johnson, Animal Supply Co.

Avoid socializing

Most of the time, customers know what business they need to conduct and are efficient in their efforts for resolution. However, there are cases where a customer wants to take extra time on non-business matters.

I advise my representatives to courteously remind the caller it has been a pleasure talking with them and that there are other callers who deserve their time and assistance as well. If the customer’s issue requires research, reps are advised to take administrative time to collaborate with other resources to make sure optimum resolution is achieved, and then call the customer back.

It also makes a difference when representatives are confident in their task procedures and policies. By knowing what is expected of you, it is easy to achieve customer satisfaction.

Megann Wither, Navy Federal Credit Union

Editor’s note: To pose a service-related question, email editor Bill Keenan at bkeenan@CustomerServiceGroup.com. Please use the subject line: Ask the Panel.



Don't tweet while you work

A recent survey of executives by Robert Half International, an international staffing firm, finds that while social media may be very popular among employees, most companies still do not allow employees to visit social networking sites while at work. Here's how the survey results broke down on rules governing social networking:

- Prohibited completely. 54%
- Permitted for business purposes only 19%
- Permitted for limited personal use. 16%
- Permitted for any type of personal use. 10%
- Don't know/No answer 1%

"Using social networking sites may divert employees' attention away from more pressing priorities, so it's understandable that some companies limit access," says Robert Half's Dave Willmer. "Even outside of business hours, regrettable posts can be a career liability," he adds.

Make gratitude a habit

The simple practice of gratitude can help you become less stressed, more joyful, more energetic, and more optimistic, says JoAnna Brandi, a customer service coach and trainer. Make gratitude a daily habit (both quietly and out

loud) and it will boost your immune system, strengthen your relationships, and make you happier over time.

Here are two of Brandi's suggestions for making gratitude a habit:

- At the end of each day, write down three good things that happened that day (and you might even write down why they happened). Reflect on the goodness in your day before going to sleep and you'll rest easier. Wake up in the morning and reflect on a few more things you are grateful for before starting your day. Before long you'll notice yourself noticing things you are grateful for all day long.

- Write three handwritten thank you notes a day — to your customers, to coworkers, to friends or family. As you increase the amount of appreciation that goes out to customers and coworkers, the value of your relationships will grow, too.

Keep a learning log

Your learning efforts should be systematic and career long, say the authors of *Delivering Knock Your Socks Off Service*. To help, keep a "learning log" — a notebook or pad that is always near at hand, in which you write down both questions and answers that will help you better define your learning and training goals and improve your service performance. "And organize your efforts," the authors say. "You can't learn everything at once, so don't try. Focus your learning program on one area at a time."

Keep track of how you feel

If you are feeling drained or stressed out at the end of your work day, find out why. Try keeping a record of your daily activities to identify what are the likely causes of your feelings of burnout. Ask yourself what you can do to free up your energy. Are there any draining tasks, behaviors, habits, or routines that you can minimize or delete?

Ask these questions after a difficult call

Ever feel down after a difficult call? Don't despair, says Art Sobczak of BusinessByPhone.com. Put things in perspective by asking yourself these questions:

- What humor can I see in this situation?
- Does this experience really affect who I am?
- What can I learn from this call? **TCC**

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“The right word may be effective, but no word was ever as effective as a rightly timed pause.” — Mark Twain

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