

## Creating Great Customer Experiences for Relocating Employees:

# How Exceptional Customer Service Can be Your Competitive Edge —

## PART 2

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*In the world of relocation, great customer service can make all the difference between an average transaction and a terrific experience for the relocating employee and his or her family. In Part 2 of this article, Neumiller-Bustad examines how to determine what the customer desires service-wise and how to turn a problem into an opportunity for delivering outstanding customer service.*

In last month's article on customer service, we looked at the strategic aspects of initiating or improving your customer service strategy, noting that the first step is envisioning an ideal customer encounter with your business or organization.

Once you know the type of experience you want your customers to have, you then identify and improve the skills needed for your employees to deliver an exceptional level of customer service.

In the relocation industry, basic customer service skills are an essential component to crafting a positive relationship with your clients. By basic, you should ensure that the "hellos" and "goodbyes" given by your employees are genuine and warm. Some organizations prefer a standard greeting be given, but

care should be taken to ensure it is authentic and not rote memorization.

Do not assume that everyone in your organization understands the necessity and importance of a friendly greeting. There are different generational expectations regarding greetings and farewells—but you should ensure that everyone understands the importance of making your customers feel welcome and appreciated.

In any customer transaction, there are many expectations—generational being just one. One of the biggest challenges facing any organization is seeking out customer expectations—listening and learning what the customer wants in the transaction.

As a starting point, any customer generally has several basic expectations:

**Speed.** Today, customers want it fast, whatever "it" may be. How quickly you can process a transaction, return a phone call, or respond to an e-mail makes all the difference.

**Personal touch**—no one wants to be just a face in the crowd. The more you can demonstrate you personally know and care about your customer, the more he or she will

respond to you. Knowing your customers' children's names, sending a birthday card, or remembering to ask about a sick parent demonstrates a level of care and concern that a person cannot find most places these days.

**Accuracy.** Customers want you to "get it right," and because so many places seem to "get it wrong" time and again, the effort you put into accuracy can make a big impression. In the relocation business, accuracy is critical.

Moving dates, contract details, corporate policies—there are many opportunities throughout a relocation to demonstrate you understand the importance of getting the details right.

**Cooperation.** If you listen closely, you can hear your customer whispering, "work with me here," every time you talk with him or her. Put yourself in the shoes of the customer—are your policies and procedures designed to make his or her life easier? Are you easy to work with? Flexible? Responsive? If your customer suffers a problem overseas, are you the one he or she trusts to help fix the problem as quickly as possible?

**Economy.** In this era of “lowest price wins,” it can be tempting to assume every customer always wants to pay the least amount possible for every service you provide.

However, customers desire and will pay for “value”—if you can communicate clearly the value you provide.

Does working with you save the corporate relocation department time, money, or effort? Do transferes value their interactions with your department as time-saving or high value? If you are unsure, you must develop effective methods to find out what your customers think about your service.

The more you understand your customers’ specific expectations, the better you can develop your relocation services to meet and exceed those expectations. While that is an easy statement to make, it can be challenging to find the time or funds to develop a full-blown customer survey.

### **Open- and Closed-ended Questions**

A less expensive way to plumb the depths of your customers’ expectations is to learn how to effectively use two different types of questioning techniques. By alternating between “closed-ended” questions and “open-ended” questions, you can probe your customers’ expectations and dig deeper into their needs and wants.

Closed-ended questions can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” When a waiter at your favorite restaurant asks you, “was everything to your satisfaction tonight?” and you respond, “yes,” he has asked you a closed-ended question. You do not have to provide him with any further information if you are not so inclined.

Many times, we think we are entering into a dialogue with a customer, hoping to get some useful information about our service to him or her. Those conversations often lead to frustration, however,

because we never seem to get beyond a superficial response. Quite often we are simply asking our customer a series of closed-ended questions, which will produce very little insight.

Open-ended questions are those that cannot be answered with a “yes” or “no.” They “open up” the conversation, allowing the respondent to give his or her perspective or opinion. It can be a deeper level of discussion, allowing for a real exchange of views.

If your waiter had asked you to rate your dining experience, that would have been an open-ended question, inviting you to respond in a number of different ways. You could talk about the tasty steak, the attentive service, or the warm and cozy atmosphere. He opened up the conversation for your response.

Most people have a natural tendency to ask one type of question over the other. If you prefer closed-ended questions, your challenge is

to ask questions that start with “how,” “why,” “when,” “who,” “what,” or “where.” You might ask a transferee, “what has been the best relocation experience you have had to date?” or more simply, “what are your expectations regarding this move?”

If you naturally ask open-ended questions, you have to practice closing the conversation down with closed-ended questions, like “did,” “can,” “do,” “is,” or “will.” Your task is to ask questions like “did the move meet your expectations?” or, “is there anything else I can do for you?”

Regardless of your natural inclinations, a skillful use of both open- and closed-ended questions can expand and contract the conversation as needed to get to the heart of your customers’ expectations.

### Inconvenience Versus Crisis

Working in the relocation business is emotionally demanding. As you seek to understand and respond to your customers’ expectations, you will encounter all types of behavior—from both the customer and your colleagues. That behavior is not always polite or pleasant, especially if your customers’ expectations are not met. And while it is easy to say, “get to know your customer,” in real life customers have a way of hiding their expectations until they are upset or angry.

Dealing with emotion is what makes customer service so challenging. And what might appear to us as an inconvenience may in fact be considered a crisis by the customer.

Picture the maintenance department of a major car dealership—dozens of cars in various stages of repair. You bring your car in for an oil change, expecting to be out of the dealership in 45 minutes, with a few minutes to spare before you need to pick up your 5-year-old from kindergarten. Last time it took 45 minutes, as well as the time before. Your expectation regarding length of time has been set by your generally pleasant past experiences with this dealership.

Unbeknownst to you, however,

today is different. Two of the regular mechanics have called in sick and cars are starting to back up. It now takes 60 minutes for an oil change. An extra 15 minutes might not seem like much to the harried shop manager, but it is a big inconvenience to you. Your concern mounts as time ticks by. When the school day ends, your irritation turns to anxiety and then anger. Assurances from the staff that your car will be ready “soon” do nothing to soothe your mounting frustration.

When the car is finally ready, you explode in fury at the helpless cashier. She is shocked by your “unwarranted” attack and responds in kind. When the shop manager comes out to see what is wrong, she does not respond well to your comments about “incompetence” and invites you to leave and not return. You reply that you were not planning to come back and will furthermore tell all of your friends not to come back.

The tardy schedule was perceived by the shop manager as an inconvenience and as a crisis by the customer. By the time they were face to face, emotion had long since replaced logic. The dealership lost a regular customer, the cashier was distraught, and the shop manager needed several more antacid tablets to get through the afternoon.

Service broke down in this case, and everyone was left with painful emotions and unresolved frustrations. You can picture the same sort of emotional encounter when a real estate closing does not happen on time, an overseas flight is delayed, or a transferee’s file is not kept up to date and accurate.

### Grace Under Fire

Service breakdowns are really an opportunity in disguise. Instead of responding emotionally, good customer service advocates become “service detectives,” trying to track down the source of a customer’s anger and then discovering what can be done to repair the damage.

A number of studies have shown that when a company successfully resolves a customer’s complaint,

customer loyalty goes up. An angry customer or a mishandled situation is an opportunity to “perform” for the customer—to go above and beyond in creating a stronger bond between customer and organization.

There are several steps you can take to demonstrate your sincere desire to resolve the customer’s problem.

**Listen.** When you practice your open-ended and closed-ended questions with customers, they will respond by talking to you. Your job is to now listen to what it is they are saying. Listening does not mean nodding your head as your brain busily tries to figure out the best way to say “we are not responsible.” Listening is the process of actively processing the information the customer is telling you. You need to quiet your mind, turn off your auto-response system, and really engage yourself in the conversation. As a service detective, your mission is to uncover the details, not assign blame.

**Acknowledge.** Sometimes the customer is wrong. Sometimes the customer is right. And sometimes the situation is so confused it is difficult to say what really happened. Regardless of what really happened, your customer is angry. Now your task is to acknowledge the very real frustrations the customer has experienced.

You begin by acknowledging both the situation the customer is experiencing and the feelings he or she is having. You might say: “Mr. Garcia, I can see that you are very upset by this situation. You waited around for the moving company to come and make an estimate for you, and when they did not arrive it threw off your schedule for the entire day.”

Notice you did not apologize (maybe the customer had the wrong date in their calendar), and you did not assign blame (which looks weak and spineless to most customers). Your task at this point is simply to do the customer the human courtesy of acknowledging his or her aggravation.

**Apologize.** When it is clear your organization has made a mistake, it is time to apologize. “Mr. Garcia, I checked our schedule and we sure did ruin your day. Our people had Thursday on their calendar, not Tuesday. You have my sincere apologies for our error. As the department manager, it is my responsibility to see that these errors do not occur and I am very sorry this happened.”

To be their most useful, apologies should be delivered in the first person (stand up and take your medicine—do not push this off to a subordinate), be sincere (yes, your organization really did make this big mistake), communicate responsibility and regret, and be specific to the customer’s experience. A formal letter does not cut it. The more serious the error, the harder you need to work to make it up to the customer.

**Problem-solve.** Now it is time to fix the situation. Determine the real

problem and try to focus on what you can control. “We cannot give you your day back, but we can reschedule you for tomorrow or whatever day is most convenient for you. What day fits best with your schedule this week?”

**Offer a goodwill gesture.** “As a way of showing you we are sorry for your inconvenience, we would like to offer you a coupon for a free dinner for you and your family at *La Mer*.” Goodwill gestures can be tangible (coupons, discounts, waived fees) or they can be intangible (personal delivery, a walk to the customer’s car, or a written note of apology). Delivered with sincerity, they can go a long way to repairing the damage done by a service breakdown.

**Follow up.** The final step and one of the most important. Follow up with a personal note, a phone call, a notation in the client’s records about what happened—

whatever you can do to make sure the customer knows you do not intend for the same mistake to happen again.

Delivering exceptional customer service is essential for your organization’s success in the years ahead. The competition continues to increase, the challenges grow larger, and the expectations of customers continue to expand. Truly exceptional customer service is still a rarity today. You have the chance to distinguish your organization from the competition on a daily basis—make the decision to offer customer service that gives your team the competitive edge. ■



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