

# Communicating With Customers

## What To Do When You Don't Have An Answer To A Customer Question?

### THE SITUATION - The Customer Question To Which You Have No Answer

It's almost impossible to have all of the answers to all possible questions customers may throw at you. When a customer asks you a question and you're unsure of the answer or simply don't know, you have two options— handle it the right way or the wrong way. The wrong way is to fake it, out of embarrassment, in the belief that the customer will think you're stupid if you admit you don't know. The right way is to tell the customer you don't know, but to make a commitment to the customer to find out, either by researching and getting back to him or her or referring the customer to someone who will know.

If you fake it, you'll find customers who will expose your ignorance for you. That's not a good feeling—and it's also bad business.

### TECHNIQUES USED

- ? Acknowledge Customer's Needs (1)
- ? Offer Choices/Empowering (2)
- ? Refer to Third Party (3)
- ? Arrange Follow-Up (4)
- ? Suggest an Alternative to Waiting (5)

### DIALOGUE - Fielding A Customer Question When You Don't Have An Answer

In this dialogue you'll see several techniques strung together to address the situation where an employee doesn't have the answer to a customer's question. First, the employee tries to find the answer; then, when that doesn't succeed, the employee refers the customer to a third party who does know the answer.

**Customer:** I'm looking at these DVD players, and I can't figure out why the prices are so different. Could you explain the differences between them?

**Employee:** I can see that you really need the right information, and I want to make sure I don't give you inaccurate information (1). Let me see if I can find the brochures so we can figure this out. It might take a minute or two. Is that OK (2)?

**Customer:** Sure, no problem.

**Employee:** If you want to browse some of the other items, I can look for the answers and get back to you when I've got something (5).

**Customer:** That would be great.

The employee can't find the material and moves to plan B.

**Employee:** I think the best thing is for me to find John, who's really the DVD expert here. If anyone can help, it would be him (3). If you have the time, I can do that now, or I can get back to you, whatever works for you (2).

**Customer:** I really can't wait right now, because I have a few other things to do. If I come back in 20 minutes, can I speak to John?

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**Employee:** Yes, that would work well, and then you don't have to wait. I'll tell John to expect you, so just ask for him when you come in (4).

## EXPLANATIONS - Why It Works To Prevent Customer Upset

The employee responds to the customer by acknowledging that the question is important to the customer, showing his concern for the customer's needs (1). Before he leaves to find the information, he explains what he's doing and asks the customer if it's OK (2), an example of offering choices and empowering the customer.

In (5) the employee makes a suggestion—that rather than standing around waiting, the customer might prefer to browse some of the other items. Not only is this considerate, but it's also a good way to encourage the customer to consider purchasing other items.

Unfortunately, the search for the brochures fails, and the employee refers the customer to a third party (3). The employee makes a special effort to describe John as the expert, which reassures the customer that the information he'll eventually get from John will be accurate and useful and, best of all, worth waiting for. The employee also, once again, offers some choices by saying, "If you have the time, I can do that now."

When the customer indicates he can't wait, the employee arranges for a follow-up (4).

There are some central themes here. We want to convey to the customer that we treat his or her need for information seriously and will do everything we can to provide that information, while inconveniencing him or her as little as possible. Throughout this dialogue, there's a sense that the employee is flexible and willing to go the extra mile. This turns a potentially embarrassing situation (lack of knowledge about merchandise) into a positive, an opportunity to demonstrate superior customer service skills and attitude.

## HINTS

A customer who is waiting and doing nothing is a customer who will become annoyed and/or leave. Reduce waits as much as possible and offer something for the 100 customer to do during waits (for example, have coffee, browse other items, return in 10 minutes). When referring to a third party, make absolutely sure the third party has the answers before making the referral. The best way to do that is to ask the third party before completing the handoff. The third party you refer to should be the last party the customer needs to talk with.

Keep the customer informed. Never walk away without explaining. Never say something like "Hold on a sec" and then walk off.

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