Chapter 17

CUSTOMER SERVICE

IN THIS CHAPTER

• Why providing great customer service is important to you, your company, and oilheat
• What customers want when something goes wrong
• Solving customer problems and handling complaints
• Helping angry or upset customers
• Hot tips for successful service calls
Chapter 17

Providing Astounding Customer Service

Service technicians—oilheat’s ambassadors

As a service technician, you will have more face-to-face contact with customers than any one else in the oilheat industry. Therefore, you are one of your industry’s most important ambassadors. What you say, how you say it, what you do, how you act, and how you look all determine how customers feel about you, your company and oilheat. Your customers trust you to take care of their problems and keep them comfortable. Your company’s and your industry’s reputation is in your hands. A good attitude and good people skills are just as important as your technical ability. Providing exceptional service is important and this chapter has tips on how to deliver it.

What’s in it for you?

When a customer requests a specific technician, writes a letter of recommendation, or tells their friends good things about your company, it is because of your technical skills, your attitude and your people skills. Raises and promotions are often based on people skills too; your managers know when you deliver good service.

Why extraordinary service is so important

Many interesting studies have been conducted to determine what impact service has on customers’ attitudes. One popular study examined why customers leave one company for another. Of the customers leaving, 66% said they switched because lack of interest in the customer by the company’s service providers. Fourteen-percent left because of unanswered complaints. Whether customers leave or stay depends on your work.

One important customer satisfaction study found that most customers do not complain. For every one complaint you hear you have 20 unhappy customers and 6 very angry ones who do not call. Complaining is too much trouble and they do not know who to complain to. However, they do get even. Seventy percent of disappointed customers would rather punish the service provider than complain. They take their business elsewhere and then tell their friends about it.

The average upset customer will tell ten friends and 18% of them will tell more than 20 people! This means for every complaint you get from an unhappy customer, at least 270 people have heard something bad about your company.

The good news is that whenever you exceed your customer’s expectations, they will be pleased. Happy customers will tell at least five friends about the experience. The only way to be sure that your customers are saying nice things about you and your company is to make sure every customer is thoroughly satisfied.

The key to successful customer relations is to put yourself in your customer’s place—to treat your customers as you would like to be treated. Do the job right.
can’t keep. If you tell a customer you are going to do something—do it. As a service technician, your job usually requires keeping promises made to customers by your company. The most common promises are appointment times for service calls. Your customers want to know exactly when you are coming to their home.

You have to communicate with your dispatcher so he/she can judge the arrival times for your future calls. The ultimate beneficiary of good communications and accurate promises is the service technician. Isn’t it nicer to work for a customer who is delighted that you arrived on time rather than one who is angry because you are late?

If, for some reason, you find that you must break a promise, do it as quickly as possible. The sooner you give your customer the bad news, the less they will be inconvenienced.

Moments of truth

It is helpful to think of customer relations in terms of “Moments of Truth.” Every time you come in contact with a customer, you have a chance to make either a good or a bad impression. Each customer contact is a one-time opportunity to distinguish yourself from the competition. Successful customer relations mean making all the “Moments of Truth” good ones. If the service provider gets it wrong, they may be erasing all memories of good treatment. If they get it right, they can undo all the mistakes that happened before.

You can make all of your moments of truth good ones by being patient, understanding and professional. If there is a problem, you need to acknowledge it and apologize for the inconvenience. Be sure to use your customer’s name, confirm you are listening, and if authorized, give the customer a choice in the resolution.

Keep promises

Breaking promises is the fastest way to lose a customer. Never make a promise you
What customers want when things go wrong

Customers want their heating system to function properly. When there’s a problem, they want it taken care of quickly. When something goes wrong, they want action, NOT excuses. They want you to fix the problem and let them get on with their day. They want you to be respectful of them, their property and their time.

Instead of quietly taking their business elsewhere, the complaining customer is telling you, “I care enough to tell you something is wrong. I am willing to stay if I get some satisfaction.” It may sound strange, but the first thing to say to a complaining customer is, “Thank you for telling us about this problem. Your satisfaction is very important to us and I will do all I can to set this right.”

Customers want to be treated in a way that suggests that the company cares about them and about fixing the problem. Customers generally do not expect service providers to be perfect, but they do expect us to care enough to repair the problem with a minimal amount of inconvenience.

The steps to problem solving

- Listen to the complaint: If the customer is upset, let them vent. You have to deal with emotions before you can solve
problems. Be prepared to listen more than talk. Say things like, “I understand why you are upset; I would be angry too.” Never disagree with the customer. Remember, this is not a personal assault. Do not react with hostility. Remain calm. The idea is to separate the problem from the customer’s emotions so you can both work together for a solution.

- **Calm them, reassure them, apologize, and get the facts**: Say to your customer, “I am very sorry this has happened. Let me see what I can do to straighten this out. Tell me exactly what happened from the beginning.” This will get them into a rational, problem-solving mind-set.

- **Enlist their help**: Ask them what you can do to set it right. Ask them what the company must do to satisfy them.

- **Cooling-off Period**: Inserting a “cooling-off” period in the middle of the problem solving process may be helpful. You can “cool-off” the situation by saying you want to review some manuals in your truck or discuss this with someone in the company who has solved a similar problem. At this point, you may also decide that the service manager should step in and help solve the problem.

- **Investigate**: Now is the time to thoroughly troubleshoot the situation to find the cause of the problem.

- **Offer the Solutions**: Explain the cause of the problem and offer the customer a solution.

**Abusive customers—when is it time to leave?**

At some point, you will encounter an abusive customer who may push you to the limit, make you angry, and cause you to respond poorly. When you are in this frame of mind you are no help to your customer, your industry, or yourself. If you start to become angry, tell the customer that you need to go to your service van. This will give you a chance to calm down, decide whether you can solve the problem, or if you need some help from the office.

Explain to the customer, “I am sorry, but if you continue to yell at me, I can’t do my job. Please let’s both calm down so that I can help you.” If all your attempts to calm the customer and yourself fail, it is time to leave. Quietly gather up your tools and leave. Do not say anything that can make the situation worse.

**Never criticize the work of others**

Never criticize the work of anyone, regardless of whether they work for your company or another company. If the customer says something like, “Gee, the man that was here last time didn’t go to this much trouble,” explain that everyone has their own approach to problems, every problem is different and you are doing your best to solve this particular problem. If one of your fellow technicians has made a mistake, take the matter up with him privately so he will not make the same mistake again.

Do not criticize your customer’s heating equipment. Remember, your company may have sold and installed it. If the equipment is obsolete, suggest an upgrade. Your customer may be pleased to hear they can save money and avoid more service calls.

No one in your industry can build customer goodwill as well as you can. Remember, you are usually the only person from your company that your customer
sees. You are the person whom the customer trusts with his family’s safety, warmth, and comfort. Keep this in mind at all times.

**Image is everything**

Surveys indicate that many people think oilheat is dirty. This is why your appearance is so important. You have to focus on clean trucks, neat uniforms, clean shoes, clean toolboxes, and leaving the customer’s homes and heating systems cleaner than you found them. Cleanliness implies a higher level of quality in the service rendered.

The airline industry has done extensive customer satisfaction research and found that people believe that if they find coffee stains on the food trays, then the airline must not do a good job on engine maintenance. The same applies to our industry—customers often judge the quality of your service by the appearance of the system after you have finished your work.

The importance of details can not be overemphasized, especially details that are crucial to creating a positive impression on the customer.

**Focus on your customer’s heating system**

Unfortunately, the condition of their furnace and the area around it is the reason so many people think that oilheat is dirty. To insure a bright future for our industry, you have to make cleaning-up of the heating systems a top priority. The customer will judge the quality of the work you have done by the appearance of his heating equipment after you have left.

When one of your customers sells their home, the condition of the heating system becomes your best salesperson—or your biggest sales problem. The new homebuyer will look at the condition of the system and draw conclusions about what kind of company left their sticker on it. If the unit is nice and clean, they will probably call you to set up an account. If the unit is a mess, they might not want to buy from the company that left this mess in their nice new home.

**What do you look like to your customer?**

What about your image? Is your truck clean? Remember, your truck is a rolling advertisement for your company.

What about the inside of your truck? Customers might look-in when you open the doors. What about your tools and toolbox? Customers believe if your tools are in good shape, you are probably a good technician who will show the same respect to their equipment.

What about your appearance? Check your appearance before each call and have enough pride in yourself to appear as presentable as possible. It is a good idea to carry an extra uniform shirt in your truck in case the one you are wearing gets dirty. You may want to have a pair of coveralls to protect your uniform on particularly dirty jobs.

Try to avoid using your customer’s facilities to wash up. Keep a can of hand cleaner in your truck, consider using protective gloves to keep your hands clean.

**A word about tobacco**

Never use tobacco when you are on your customer’s property.

**Conclusion**

The extra value that you provide to your customers is what sets your company apart. Your professionalism and dedication are the most valuable things you have to sell. You make your company unique and special.
Hot Tips for Successful Service Calls

— Be on time. Being late, without notification, is the quickest way to get off on the wrong foot with your customer.

— Prepare... ask the dispatcher if your company has been to the residence recently and gather appropriate information.

— Be careful where you park. Don’t block the customer’s car, drive on the lawn or walk through the flowerbeds.

— Set yourself up with a well-organized toolbox. This will reduce the number of trips you need to make to your truck.

— Keep track of your calls with a service card hanging near the system. Write the date, your initials, a brief explanation of what you did, the parts you used and the efficiency readings. This card can be a big help with troubleshooting.

— The most important service call is the preventative maintenance tune-up. It gives you a chance to look for potential problems and fix them before they occur. This is also a great time to talk to your customer about the possibilities of investing in new energy saving heating equipment.

— Do not let the problems of the previous call affect your attitude on this call.

— Some customers like to watch you work. It helps to explain what you are doing and make recommendations. Getting the customer involved may sound like trouble, but they deserve to know what is happening. You may be able to show them how they can avoid problems in the future. Involving the customer improves customer relations and may help avoid complaints.

— If an expensive part is broken and not covered by the service plan, get the customer’s approval before replacing it.

— Always look beyond the symptoms for the cause of the problem. For example, a “bound” fuel unit is often a symptom of water in an oil tank and water in the tank may be a symptom of a rotted fill or vent pipe. Be sure to find and fix the cause, not just the symptom.

— Do not discuss one customer’s problems, home condition, or cleanliness with other customers.

— Keep a clean, well-organized service truck (photo). It will go a long way to making your day more pleasant.

— Be sure to notify your manager about calls that require follow-up for immediate attention.

— Pay attention to your personal appearance. Clean and neat projects a professional image.

— Keep your “library” of service information and literature up-to-date.

— Answer questions from customers honestly and thoughtfully.

— The easiest way to upset a person is to discuss controversial subjects such as politics and religion, so do not do it.

— Never make a promise you cannot keep. Check first with the service manager, dispatcher or other personnel before making a promise to a customer.

— Concentrate on solving the problem at hand. Do not boast of the problems you have solved in the past.

— When you are finished, leave the areas around the heating system cleaner than you found them. Tell the customer what you did, show them the parts you replaced, and thank them for the opportunity to be of service.