16 Customer Service Skills Everyone Needs in Small Business:

1. Patience

If you don't see this near the top of a customer service skills list, you should stop reading.

Not only is patience important to customers, who often reach out to support when they are confused and frustrated, but it's also important to the business at large: we've shown you before that great service beats fast service every single time.

Yet patience shouldn't be used as an excuse for slothful service either!

Derek Sivers explained his view on "slower" service as being an interaction where the time spent with the customer was used to better understand their problems and needs from the company.

If you deal with customers on a daily basis, be sure to stay patient when they come to you stumped and frustrated, but also be sure to take the time to truly figure out what they want — they'd rather get competent service than be rushed out the door!

2. Attentiveness

The ability to *really* listen to customers is so crucial for providing great service for a number of reasons.

Earlier I went over a [few customer feedback systems](#), and before that I showed you the data on why listening to customer feedback is a must for many [businesses who are looking to innovate](#).

Not only is it important to pay attention to individual customer interactions (watching the language/terms that they use to describe their problems), but it's also important to be mindful and attentive to the feedback that you receive *at large*.

For instance, customers may not be saying it outright, but perhaps there is a pervasive feeling that your software's dashboard isn't laid out correctly. Customers aren't likely to say, "Please improve your [UX]!," but they may say things like, "I can never find the search feature," or, "Where is the _____ function at again?"

What are your customers telling you without saying it?

3. Clear communication skills

Make sure you're getting to the problem at hand quickly;

==customers don't need your life story or to hear about how your day is going.==

More importantly, you need to be cautious about how some of your communication habits translate to customers, and it's best to err on the side of caution whenever you find yourself questioning a situation.

An example: The last time I went to get work done on my car, I was told by an employee that if I wanted to get an oil change, it would be "included" in my final bill.

I thought that meant I'd be getting it for *free*, yet as it turns out, that wasn't the case. The employee apologized and I truly believe it was an accident (they just worked there), but I haven't been back to that shop since because of the miscommunication.

When it comes to important points that you need to relay clearly to customers, keep it simple and leave nothing to doubt.

4. Knowledge of the Product

The best forward-facing employees in your company will work on having a **deep**knowledge of how your product works. Without knowing your product from front to back, you won't know how to help customers when they run into problems.

It's not that every single team member should be able to build your product from scratch, but rather they should know the ins and outs of how your product works, just like a customer who uses it every day would. Every new Help Scout employee, for example, is trained on customer support during their first or second week on the job — it's a critical component of our [employee onboarding process](#).

Knowing the product that you support inside and out is mission critical for anyone in support," says Help Scout support team member Elyse Roach. "Having that solid product foundation not only ensures you've got the best tricks up your sleeve to help customers navigate even the most complex situations, it also helps you build understanding about their experience so that you can become their strongest advocate."

Without knowing your product from front-to-back, you won't know how to help customers when they run into problems.

5. Ability to use positive language

Sounds like fluffy nonsense, but your ability to make minor changes in your conversational patterns can truly go a long way [in creating happy customers](#).

Language is a very important part of persuasion, and people (especially customers) create perceptions about you and your company based off of the language that you use.

An example: Let's say a customer contacts you with an interest in a particular product, but that product happens to be backordered until next month.

Small changes that employ "positive language" can greatly affect how the customer *hears* your response...

- **Without positive language:** "I can't get you that product until next month; it is back-ordered and unavailable at this time."

- **With positive language:** "That product will be available next month. I can place the order for you right now and make sure that it is sent to you as soon as it reaches our warehouse."

The first example isn't *negative* per se, but the tone it conveys feels abrupt and impersonal, and can be taken the wrong way by customers, especially in email support when the [perception of written langugage can skew negative](#).

Conversely, the second example is stating the same thing (the item is unavailable), but instead focuses on when/how the customer will get to their resolution rather than focusing on the negative.

6. Acting skills

Sometimes you're going to come across people that you'll never be able to make happy.

Situations outside of your control (they had a terrible day, or they are just a natural-born complainer) will sometimes creep into your usual support routine, and you'll be greeted with those "barnacle" customers that seem to want nothing else but to pull you down.

Every great customer service rep will have those *basic acting skills*necessary to maintain their usual cheery persona in spite of dealing with people who may be just plain grumpy.

7. Time management skills

Hey, despite my many research-backed rants on why you should spend more time with customers, the bottom line is that there *is* a limit, and you need to be concerned with getting customers what they want in an efficient manner.

The trick here is that this should also be applied when realizing when you simply **cannot** help a customer. If you don't know the solution to a problem, the best kind

of support professional will get a customer over to someone who does.

Don't waste time trying to go above and beyond for a customer in an area where you will just end up wasting both of your time!

8. Ability to 'read' customers

You won't always be able to see customers face-to-face, and in many instances (nowadays) you won't even hear a customer's voice!

That doesn't exempt you from understanding some [basic principles of behavioral psychology](#) and being able to "read" the customer's current emotional state.

This is an important part [of the personalization process](#) as well, because it takes knowing your customers to create a personal experience for them.

More importantly though, this skill is *essential* because you don't want to mis-read a customer and end up losing them due to confusion and miscommunication. As Emily Triplett Lentz wrote in [Boost Customer Happiness with Exclamations and Emoticons](#):

"I rarely use a smiley face in a support email when the customer's signature includes "PhD," for example — not that academics are humorless, just that ":)" isn't likely to get you taken seriously by someone who spent five years deconstructing utopian undertones in nineteenth-century fictional autobiography."

Look and listen for subtle clues about their current mood, patience level, personality, etc., and you'll go far in keeping your customer interactions positive.

9. A calming presence

There are a lot of metaphors for this type of personality: "keeps their cool," "staying cool under pressure," and so on, but it all represents the same thing: the ability some people have to stay calm and even influence others when things get a little hectic.

I've had my fair share of hairy hosting situations, and I can tell you in all honesty that the #1 reason I stick with certain hosting companies is due to the ability of their customer support team to keep me from pulling my hair out.

The best customer service reps know that they can't let a heated customer force them to lose their cool

; in fact it is their *job* to try to be the "rock" for a customer who thinks the world is falling down due to their current problem.

10. Goal-oriented focus

This may seem like a strange thing to list as a customer service skill, but I assure you it's vitally important.

In my article on [empowering employees](#), I noted that many customer service experts have shown how giving employees unfettered power to "WOW" customers doesn't always generate the returns many businesses expect to see.

That's because it leaves employees without goals, and business goals + customer happiness can work hand-in-hand without resulting in poor service.

Relying on frameworks like the *[Net Promoter Score](#)* can help businesses come up with guidelines for their employees that allow plenty of freedom to handle customers on a case-to-case basis, but also leave them priority solutions and "go-to" fixes for common problems.

11. Ability to handle surprises

Sometimes the customer support world is going to throw you a curveball.

Maybe the problem you encounter isn't specifically covered in the company's guidelines, or maybe the customer isn't reacting how you thought they would.

Whatever the case, it's best to be able to think on your feet ... but it's even *better* to create guidelines for **yourself** in these sorts of situations.

Let's say, for instance, you want to come up with a quick system for when you come across a customer who has a product problem you've never seen before ...

- **Who?** One thing you can decide right off the bat is *who* you should consider your "go-to" person when you don't know what to do. The CEO might be able to help you, but you can't go to them with every single question! Define a logical chain for

yourself to use, then you won't be left wondering who you should forward the problem to.

- **What?** When the problem is noticeably out of your league, *what* are you going to send to the people above? The full conversation, just the important parts, or maybe some highlights and an example of a similar ticket?

- **How?** When it comes time to get someone else involved, *how* are you going to contact them? For instance, at [Help Scout](#) we use our own product to [assign conversations to another team member](#), or [@mention](#) the person from whom we need help in a note within the conversation.

12. Persuasion skills

This is one a lot of people didn't see coming!

Experienced customer support personnel know that oftentimes, you will get messages in your inbox that are more about the *curiosity* of your company's product, rather than having problems with it.

(Especially true if your email is available on-site, [like ours](#)).

To truly take your customer service skills to the next level, you need to have some mastery of **persuasion** so you can convince interested customers that your product is right for them (if it truly is).

It's not about making a sales pitch in each email, but it is about not letting potential customers *slip away* because you couldn't create a compelling message that your company's product is worth purchasing!

13. Tenacity

Call it what you want, but a great work ethic and a willingness to do what needs to be done (and not take shorcuts) is a key skill when providing the kind of service that people talk about.

The memorable [customer service stories](#) out there (many of which had a huge impact on the business) were created by a single employee who refused to just do the "status quo" when it came to helping someone out.

Remembering that your customers are people too, and knowing that putting in the extra effort will come back to you ten-fold should be your driving motivation to never "cheat" your customers with lazy service.

14. Closing ability

To be clear, this has nothing to do with "closing sales" or other related terms.

Being able to *close* with a customer means being able to end the conversation with confirmed satisfaction (or as close to it as you can achieve) and with the customer feeling that everything has been taken care of (or will be).

Getting booted after a customer service call or before all of their problems have been addressed is [the *last* thing that customers want](#), so be sure to take the time to confirm with customers that each and every issue they had on deck has been entirely resolved.

Your willingness to do this shows the customer three very important things:

- That you care about getting it right

- That you're willing to keep going until you get it right

- That the customer is the one who determines what "right" is.

When you get a customer to, "*Yes, I'm all set!*" is when you know the conversation is over.

15. Empathy

Perhaps empathy — the ability to understand and share the feelings of another — is more of a character trait than a skill. But since empathy can be learned and improved upon, we'd be remiss not to include it here. In fact, if your organization tests job applicants for customer service aptitude, you'd be hard pressed to look for a more critical skill than empathy.

That's because even when you can't tell the customer exactly what they want to hear, a dose of care, concern and understanding will go a long way. A support rep's ability to empathize with a customer and craft a message that steers things toward a better outcome can often make all the difference.

16. Willingness to learn

If you came across this article and read all the way to the bottom, you likely already have this skill (nice job!).

This is probably the most general skill on the list, but it's still necessary.

Those who don't seek to improve what they do, whether it's building products, marketing businesses, or helping customers, will get left behind by the people willing to invest in their skills.