Customer Service





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Why Customer Service Matters... In a Big Way

As educators, we often don't think of ourselves as service providers. So, we don't relate what we do as being about customer service. Yet, we do have customers (students, parents, community members, other staff members), and we do serve them! We are each a representative of our school with every contact we make. Whether we are a crossing guard or the superintendent, whether we are dealing with a parent or a co-worker, they are all our customers, so our very presence makes us a customer service representative.

In this age of school choice, when there is more competition for students and quality staff, it is imperative that we take some lessons from the business world about how to provide good customer service and apply those best practices to our schools.

As society gets more and more connected digitally, people become less and less connected to one another. While it is important to make access to our information convenient and readily available in order to get our communities to know, like, and trust us (the definition of branding and marketing), we need to reach out to our customers in a real way. Whether it is face-to-face, over the phone, online, or through the stories we tell on our social media and websites, we need to show that our caring goes beyond what is convenient for us. That is what good customer service is all about.



We can have a reputation like that of the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), or we can earn the reputation of a Nordstroms, Disney, or Ace Hardware. Complacency is the true enemy here. Educators cannot disregard the importance of customer service since ignoring the issue won't make it go away. Our school's reputation and brand image will be made for us, and we definitely won't like the outcome. Unfettered complacency will lead to declining enrollment, low morale, inability to attract quality staff, loss of funding, and eventually shuttered schools.

If you don't think your school needs great customer service, ask yourself if you've ever seen any of these examples at your school?

- Staff who doesn't make positive contact with parents before contacting them about a problem
- School that is dirty or cluttered (inside or outside)
- Negative people in the front office
- A teacher who is not excited about getting a new student
- Staff not responding to a parent concern or call within 24 hours
- Staff showing more concern about teacher interests than student interests
- Unanswered phones (forcing callers to an automated phone system—or no answer at all)
- Leadership ignoring bad customer service practices from their staff
- Staff talking negatively about a student, school, or colleague with members of the community
- A lack of common courtesy among staff members or toward students

When we view customer service from this angle, we will often realize that there is room in our schools for improvement.

If, on the other hand, we were to demonstrate the following beliefs, how might it change our school culture and reputation?



We believe everyone should be treated the way we would hope to be treated.



We believe that you and your child are the reasons we are here.



We believe that your child can reach his or her highest potential, no excuses.

Can you see how these beliefs can and do affect what type of customer service we would expect to deliver? But, if you read the above and felt confident that these describe your school's values, don't get cocky too quickly.

It is important to understand your school's goals, but your analysis of success must be based not on your perceptions but on those of your customers. As educators, we often make assumptions that are not based on reality. We know our heart (and intentions), but our customers may have a far different viewpoint.

Gathering data from your customers is vital, and with today's digital choices, it is easier than ever. There are online surveys, phone surveys, social media surveys, and you can use class competitions to encourage parent participation. A pizza party for the class with the most participation can go a LONG way toward students getting their parents to engage!

Here are some basic <u>customer service survey questions</u> to get you started.

Our Changing Environment and Increased Competition

Over the past 20 years, we have seen companies that have been around for more than 100 years close their doors. Most of these kings of the hill didn't realize it was happening until it was too late.

This usually happens because companies are faced with increased competition, or they are unable to evolve with the changing times. And most of these companies were confident, prior to their demise, that because they had a corner on the market, they were safe. Think: Montgomery Ward, Pan Am, Woolworths, Oldsmobile, Bethlehem Steel, Levitz, and Tower Records. But another cause for the demise of icons in business is the failure to recognize the critical nature of customer service. For example, U.S. Airways lost their customer base due to its failure to listen



and react to its customers as did Blockbusters and Sears. Once the love was gone, they never recovered.

Is it possible that schools could fall victim to the same types of myopic belief that they can't fail? After all, education has weathered all kinds of cultural, social, and economic storms in the past. They aren't businesses selling products. Or are they? Aren't they selling the promise to produce educated students? Is this a fair comparison?

In the remote past, prior to having many choices regarding their child's education, parents only had the option of talking to the teacher or principal or showing up at a governing board meeting with his or her complaint. Today, there are many choices to deal with dissatisfaction, and they include telling everyone they know (and thanks to social media, myriads of folks they don't know) about it. They also have the option of finding another education alternative. There are options like home, online, private, public, and alternative schooling— and a mixture of them all.

HOW WILL UNHAPPY CUSTOMERS DEAL WITH DISSATISFACTION?

1. Complain to family, friends, and neighbors

2. Share their experience on social media

3. Send reviews to local media or post on websites like GREATSCHOOLS.ORG

4. Find an alternative option such as:

Home School

Faith-based School

Online School

Private School

Charter School

Public School (outside district)



This comparison to the business sector might be closer to home than we would like to admit. Like businesses:



We must recognize that just because K-12 education as we currently know it has existed for decades, doesn't mean it won't change radically.



We must recognize that when customers have other options (they do), and we don't treat them well, we will lose their trust and loyalty, and they will choose other options.



We must recognize that negative publicity can damage our reputation. Bad word of mouth can destroy a business (which includes schools).



We must accept the fact that it is the responsibility of every individual at our school to affect its success and reputation.



We must accept that putting the status quo over customer expectations and customer service can make our school irrelevant in the minds of our customers. Another aspect concerning competition and our ability to succeed at our educational goals, is whether or not we are able to partner with others who have a hand in a student's success. That would be parents and the community.

When our actions represent our school's mission and we partner with parents and the community, we increase each student's likelihood of reaching his or her potential exponentially.

Equity is an area that comes up frequently when discussing educational concerns. Some students have the support they need to succeed. Some students have engaged parents, friends with similar goals, family members with high expectations for them, and resources to help them succeed. Others do not.

If we fail to engage parents, we are keeping students in the "do not" category. As a school, we can't control much with regard to a student's socio-economic environment or his or her demographics, and certainly not his or her family expectations, but we can have an impact on how welcoming we are to our students and their families to encourage continued engagement. And it can begin with a focus on customer service.





Who are your customers?

What we must first recognize is that customer service isn't a department. It is the responsibility of everyone who works for our schools, volunteers at our schools, or who represent our schools in any way. It is something we need to build right into our culture. The very best companies get this, and it is important that the best schools do likewise. It should begin with who we hire and continue with our ongoing training, our goals and mission, and how we show what we value.

For starters, we need to begin by acknowledging that we have two types of customers—our internal customers and our external customers. Yes, every single person at your school has a customer (probably many). Let's look at those individually.

Internal customers

Our internal customers are anyone who works at or with our school. That includes volunteers, those we work alongside whether paid or not. Your own personal internal customer is anyone who is dependent on you for meeting a goal, providing information, or hitting a deadline.

We might tend to take this group for granted because we feel like we're all on the same team. But, that team attitude will only exist if we treat our team members with the same respect and courtesy that we want to enjoy. Our internal customers need to feel valued and respected. When they do, they are much more likely to deliver outstanding external customer service. It is nearly impossible to provide good external service if your school isn't also delivering on good internal service. But there are a few guidelines that will help make these relationships more positive:

- Set clear expectations. This is especially true when someone asks
 for assistance when you have a time sensitive project on your plate.
 Identify the nature of their request in relation to the importance of
 yours. If their requests are unrealistic, explain your timelines and
 priorities, but be sure to reinforce your desire to provide them with
 great service as well.
- Follow up. This is especially important when you've done a hand-off
 or you've contributed to a project you are working on together. It's
 usually better to over-communicate, and it shows you are engaged.
- Get to know your co-workers. When you learn more about them, it is easy to help them feel valued. Call them by name, smile, make eye contact, and be attentive to what they have to say. Asking questions and really listening to the answers will go a long way toward developing not only a strong team environment, but it will make providing excellent internal customer service a breeze.

External customers

Some definitions of an external customer are anyone who makes your paycheck possible. In the case of schools, that means you have a lot of external customers (if you are a public school, that is every taxpayer in the community). But basically, your external customers have a choice. They can take their business elsewhere—and how they are treated can and does make that happen. Typically, your primary external customers are parents, and mothers are often the main point of contact at the school. But, other customers are students, volunteers, community members, media, and anyone else who clicks on your website, calls, or comes through your doors.

Who are your school customer service representatives?

That would be you, for starters. It is also every single employee in your school. Yes, even the volunteers whom you don't actually have to pay. And, to make it even more complicated, the role of school customer service representative doesn't end when you head out the door at the end of the day. You can't wear the customer service hat at work and grouse about how awful things are at the school after hours. The reason is you carry tremendous clout when it comes to believability.

Even if the school website shows how great the school is, the local news runs positive articles, and your school's social media is packed with enthusiasm and evidence of success, what you say in

the grocery line is what people will actually believe. Basically, YOU are the school. You (and everyone else there, including that curmudgeon down the hall) are the walking, talking truth tellers. What are you saying? What are those around you saying?

"CUSTOMER SERVICE IS
YOUR DIFFERENTIATOR,
SO MAKE IT COUNT. MAKE
IT CONVENIENT TO DO
BUSINESS WITH YOUR
SCHOOL."

"WE CREATE CONFIDENCE BY BEING CONSISTENT IN OUR SERVICE. WITHOUT IT WE CAN'T HAVE TRUST OR LOYALTY." The quickest way of transforming your school's culture is to create a customer-friendly environment. The true power of implementing outstanding customer service is the impact you will have on the lives of the students who matriculate through your school. We learn from one another, and we learn most from what we see that works well. When students see courtesy, understanding, good communication, and kindness at play all around them in their schools, they will emulate those tactics and patterns to their own success. It is true that schools are not typically responsible for teaching morality and values, but it is happening regardless. And some of those inadvertent lessons may be the most valuable ones our students learn within the walls of our schools. Make them count.





In order to implement school-wide customer service initiatives, leadership will be critical to success. As a new initiative, it will be received with suspicion and maybe negativity. That is because initiatives come and go. Every year there is something new to be implemented, learned, or applied. So, skepticism should come as no surprise. In order to be effective, it will need to come from the top, and the leaders will need to set expectations and then walk the talk. Everyone, from the board of education to the crossing guard will need to become engaged in the process. It will require training, setting examples, and rewarding successes.

Think of it this way: The first person to greet a child each school day is often the bus driver. They are a key contact for those students and a first look at customer service. Another often overlooked area is our food service workers. How does that exchange look from a customer service perspective? Friendly? Inviting? And those are just the people. What about the facility? Is it also customer friendly and inviting? We'll talk more about that later, but it is a whole package, and that means getting everyone on the same page, which takes leaders who will model and nurture a culture of caring. We are all customer service providers when it comes to our schools.

Customer service is the first step toward creating a positive image of the school within your community and within your school culture.

Let's Get Inside the Heads of Our Customers

Customer service, whether for our internal or our external customers, is about meeting our customers' needs. So, what do our customers want? Jess Nash, in his book "Rock 'N Roll Customer Service," lists five areas of customer needs:

- 1. Customers want to feel welcome. This means that the customer needs to feel that it is okay, and even welcomed, for them to approach us for assistance. Whether it is over the phone, in our front office, or passing us in the hallway, do we make it clear that they are welcome? Do we make eye contact or never look up from our desk and just grumble, "Yeah, may I help you?" with a tone that says "I certainly hope not"?
- 2. Customers want to be understood. Sometimes our staff feels like it is the responsibility of the customer to make us understand their request. But, it is our responsibility, and yes, sometimes that is quite challenging. But with the right questions and by maintaining a calm and helpful demeanor, we can achieve remarkable results.
- 3. Customers want to maintain their dignity. If our customers feel like they are talked down to or demeaned, they will feel the loss of dignity that none of us would enjoy. It is sometimes called civility, and when we were in kindergarten, it was called "being nice." It still applies today and, though less and less common, is critical to good customer service.

- 4. Customers need our assistance. Unfortunately, it isn't very often that a customer shows up or calls in just to tell us what a great job we are doing. So, the customers we typically see need something. The most common mistake is that we assume we know what they need after they speak just a few words. Sometimes we even interrupt to get them on their way more quickly. It is imperative that we listen to their needs before we respond. Listening is a highly underrated super power. And, it is one that we could all gain with some focused effort on our part.
- 5. Customers need to know they are valued. This doesn't just apply to parents, you know, those folks we are always trying to get more involved in a positive way with our schools so that their children will benefit. It also applies to our coworkers. Morale is often high or low based on how valued our staff feels. Student perform better when they know they are valued. Likewise, parents who feel they are valued will engage with and contribute to your school in a more positive way.





Five Common Pitfalls

So, if you're with me so far, you will agree that there is a need for great customer service in our schools. Let's look at what contributes to poor customer service first:

Not hiring right

You can train for most things, but it is more difficult to train for qualities like empathy, warmth, optimism, and conscientiousness. These are all essential qualities for not only providing quality customer service but for most other positions as well—like teaching, leading, and serving. You wouldn't go wrong by factoring in interview questions that give weight to these desired qualities. One way to interview for qualities you desire is to have your very best staff (with these desired traits) answer profile questions and use their results to help you gauge your interviewees responses. Avoid the pitfall of not hiring for the qualities that will make implementing great customer service possible.

Not training right

It is the rare school that regularly and consistently trains all new staff in how to treat customers. This is a common pitfall that leads to, if not bad service, at least, inconsistent service. Instead, provide customer service as part of all new hire orientations, for both your certified and classified staff. But, don't let it end there, assuming that all it takes is a quick training and you can forget about it. Your customer service training should be a periodic process for deeper training, review, examples, and reinforcement. It is also an opportunity to use real examples from among your own staff, which will reinforce the best behaviors while setting expectations to which staff can aspire. Being reminded, especially with stories from within the ranks, can be a powerful and memorable training tool.



"Show me a consistently rude school secretary, and I'll show you a school principal that doesn't give a flying flip about customer service!"

Jeff Nash, author and school customer service guru

Not setting expectations right

This becomes primarily, or at least initially, the role of the leader. He or she must set the expectations, and that includes having written expectations, setting the example, and recognizing those who apply these standards to their own roles.

Without accomplishing these three goals, the project is doomed to failure. Expectations must be clear, right behaviors rewarded (even if only through public and private acknowledgement), and stories of success recognized and praised.

Not observing right

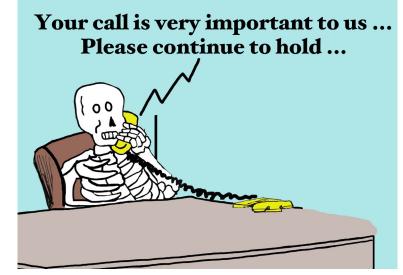
One mistake is to assume you know what your customers are experiencing. Often our own biases can distort our view. (This is particularly true if you are a superintendent or principal because your experience as a leader will always be more positive that the regular Joe.) The best way to see clearly is to walk in your customer's shoes.

Call in on the school phone line and experience what parents experience (assuming you don't identify yourself as their boss). Use the website and locate the information parents or prospective staff might need to locate and use. Get a "secret shopper" to come visit the front office and

ask the kinds of questions a prospective parent might ask and let you know how that experience went. Walk around and see what visitors, students, and staff see. Park in the visitor's parking lot, read the signage they are greeted with. Put yourself in your customer's shoes. Hang out in the teacher's lounge, use the student restroom, eat in the cafeteria, and see what your customers' see.

Not doing beginnings and endings right

In any new experience, we tend to remember the first and the last thing that happens to us. So our customers' experiences, the ones they will remember and share with others, are more likely to be the greetings and the goodbyes. What are the typical greetings at your school? For parents it is often the front office. For students it might be the bus driver or the crossing guard. For prospective staff it may be the interviewer or committee or maybe it is the website and the application process. How do these experiences feel? What will they remember? Is it a good or bad customer experience?



Sensational Customer Service

Now that we've talked about what mistakes to avoid, let's put some things in place that will put your school's customer service on the right foot.

Raise the bar

Expectations for school customer service is no different than for any other business or organization. Customers won't give you a pass just because you educate their children. They may expect an even better experience since they have entrusted you with their beloved offspring. So, that means you may need to streamline registration processes so parents don't have to complete forms with duplicate information. Or it might mean you need to change your receptionist processes to avoid transferring customers around to various departments multiple times.

Make it simple

Don't force your customers to contact the schools for items or information they could easily access themselves on your website. Are forms available to complete online? Can they submit them online and receive a confirmation that their form was properly sent? Do your FAQs answer the questions that customers commonly ask to save them a phone call or a trip to the office? Are events and calendar items current and readily available? What about menus and availability to make payments online for lunches? Are office hours posted and methods for contacting teachers clear? To find out how helpful your website is, ask every school secretary and counselor what the most commonly asked questions they get from parents and staff are, and make sure that information is on your website.



Put your customers first

Help your staff know the priorities. A walk-in customer gets priority (they made the biggest effort to come to your school, after all), the phone call is next, and the e-mail after that. And speaking of the phone, make every effort to have a real live person answer the phone. It speaks volumes to a parent who is calling in when no one ever answers the phone or if they are finally able to wade through a confusing (or broken) phone tree message system but don't receive a call back. Your customer service has just earned a big fat "F" that will be a difficult grade to bring up.

Students should also be treated with respect. We've seen front office personnel ignore students waiting at the front desk, never even bothering to look up from their desk but more quickly respond to an adult walking up. Everyone deserves a smile, some kindness, and the treatment they would like to receive if the roles were reversed.

Build a culture of yes

In our own company, I want our staff to feel like owners. I want them to feel comfortable in helping our customers without being a slave to a process. This means helping staff understand the value of getting to a "yes" with customers. Customers don't want to hear "that's not my job" or "that isn't my department" or "if you will call back tomorrow, perhaps someone can help you then." Unfortunately, it can become part of a culture to say no to our customers—to pass the buck.

You need to reset and model a culture with a spirit of yes (as well as hiring and training for

"yes" as well). Your goal is to get staff to feel like their goal is to assist and feel happy about doing so. This is an attitude that must be valued and recognized. It also means you have to eliminate or retrain those individuals who might have created a little fiefdom, who enjoy saying no as a form of individual power. You've all experienced this person, the institutional

tyrant everyone avoids at all costs. With departments and silos of authority, this can be a breeding ground for such situations. Recognize, retrain, or root them out quickly.

Caveat: This does not mean saying yes to students or students' parents if it takes away any personal responsibility they should have or if a "yes" will be unfair to other students. That does nobody any good and isn't the kind of "yes" we are referring to. (Examples are indefinite deadline extensions, gradefudging, ignoring rules, etc.)

Apologize

Regardless of how well you plan and train, things will go wrong. Learning to apologize, and helping staff recognize how important this is, is of tremendous value for customer service. The apology might not be for something you did, but you can still be sorry that your customer is having a negative experience. Help your staff understand that an apology isn't an admittance of guilt but will go a long way toward making any situation better, if only as a reflection of empathy.



Putting It All Together

So, where do you begin? We'd advise you to first make an objective review of where your biggest customer service challenges are. Is it that terrible phone tree system you use that makes your customers furious every time they call in? Is it that institutional tyrant guarding the front office? Or is it an issue that is more holistic and everyone thinks that customer service is someone else's responsibility? For all of these, the first step is to do an audit. Often that means you'll need to take a multiple pronged approach.

Conduct a customer service audit



Observe by walking around.



Recruit a secret shopper to experience all the possible touch points from a parent or student perspective.



Create and use customer service surveys to find out what your various customers think. That means a different survey for students than the ones you use for parents or staff.

Once you've gathered all the data you can, decide what the first priority might be. Is it

implementing customer service training (the most common first step)? How will you deliver it? By departments or roles or a combination? Will it be formal or casual and conducted inhouse, or will you hire a consultant? There are many choices, and the best solution for your school may be different than the school down the street, but whatever you decide, we recommend that this NOT be a one-time thing and you consider it done. The training you choose should become part of your school culture. It should be given to every new hire, regardless of their role within the school. Reminders of customer service goals should be a frequent part of staff meetings. Recognition of those superstar customer service folks and sharing customer service success stories should be a regular occurrence.



IMPLEMENT YOUR CUSTOMER SERVICE INITIATIVE

- Hire the best people (who demonstrate that they understand that customer service is an important part of their job).
- Train all staff—especially critical for those in the front lines.
- Conduct a customer service audit.
 Use phone and online surveys, exit surveys, and customer feedback cards.
- Incorporate regular status checks.
 Periodically use outside sources so you get an objective review.
- Praise and reward behaviors that support your customer service goals.
- Put your facility maintenance as a top priority. (Take photos of areas to improve and those areas that are praiseworthy.)
- Walk the talk and be an example of what great customer service is (to staff and co-workers as well as external customers).
- Give your staff permission to make common-sense decisions that will support improved customer service.
- Be quick to apologize.
- Encourage relationship building among staff, students, and parents (our customers).

Conduct customer service training Sample Training Outline

1. Understanding school customer service

- a. Learning the value of customer service
- b. Who are our customers?
- c. What's a customer-friendly approach?
- d. Identifying customer expectations
- e. Committing to excellent customer service

2. Focusing on the customer

- a. Creating a positive first impression
- b. Identifying and helping meet customer needs
- c. Effective customer service phrases
- d. Creating a positive last impression

3. Handling complaints

- a. Creating loyal/happy customers
- b. Resolving the customer's problem
- c. Coping with upset or difficult customers

4. Excellent customer service on the telephone

- a. Answering the phone (what to say and not to say)
- b. Projecting a positive image over the phone
- c. Transferring calls/following up
- d. Taking meaningful messages
- e. Responding to phone calls



Parting Impressions

In order to become a school of choice, customer service MUST be high on your list of priorities. Poor customer service is simply no longer tolerated, and parents will show their dissatisfaction in very uncomfortable ways. They will complain to everyone they know (and with social media, that can be in the thousands or more); they can take their child out of your school; they can tarnish your brand and reputation and influence other parents; and they can make for a very bad day for everyone involved.

Most of the time, a negative customer experience will be avoided through simple courtesy, by setting expectations for your school staff, by keeping your promises, and by providing regular customer service training. The added

benefits are numerous. You'll see improved morale, teams that work better together, less staff turnover, improved student behaviors, and your school will just become a more enjoyable place to work. It's a win-win for everyone.

Below, we've included some links to help you get started. Oh, and don't forget, if we can ever help you with your school communications, website, social media, or public relations efforts, we hope you'll contact <u>School</u> <u>Webmasters</u>. We've been serving schools for 14 years and are proud to provide your school with the kind of customer service you deserve!



Example Customer Service Survey Questions

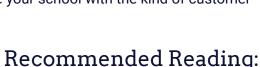
Effective Customer Service Phrases for Schools

From Good to Great: School Customer Service (Blog article)

Parents: Raving Fans or Raging Foes? (Blog article)

Choose Your Words Wisely...It Matters (Blog article)

<u>Sign Up for School Webmasters Blog</u> (for bi-monthly articles on similar topics)



Rock 'N Roll Customer Service, by Jeff Nash

Who Cares? Improving Public Schools Through Relationships and Customer Service, by Kelly E. Middleton & Elizabeth A. Petitt

The Customer Rules: The 39 Essential Rules for Delivering Sensational Service, by Lee Cockerell

The Go Giver, by Bob Burg



AUTHOR BIO



Bonnie Leedy is the CEO of School Webmasters. Before founding School Webmasters in 2003, Bonnie worked as a public relations director in the corporate world. She brings 27 years of writing and communications expertise to the

role. Her experience provides School Webmasters with the ability to help schools and organizations create effective websites. Bonnie and her staff turn websites into centers for effective communications, marketing, and public relations. School Webmasters also provides valuable recommendations to schools regarding site content, architecture, SEO, social media, and best practices in website management and strategy.

ABOUT SCHOOL WEBMASTERS

At School Webmasters we focus on providing personalized service and delighting our customers. Schools, whether public or private, are charged with keeping their communities and shareholders engaged and informed through effective communication channels, by building trust, and by demonstrating transparency. We know schools are pressed for time and resources, which is why we feel the necessity to provide not only excellent website management services but also useful information to help manage your school's communication, marketing, and public relations.

We hope you enjoy this eBook and invite you to be a part of the conversation by following our blog at www.schoolwebmasters.com/blog as we share best communication practices for schools.











