

RETAIL ROUNDUP



## When Good Customer Service Rules Go Bad

[By Laurie Brown]

Tony did exactly as he was trained. He sent a handwritten thank-you note to his customer. However, when his customer received it, she was furious and tore it up before throwing it out.

How could something as well intentioned as a thank-you note create such a negative reaction? As it turns out, this customer was still in the process of getting a serious issue resolved with Tony and his company. The thank-you note arrived before this issue was dealt with, he never mentioned it, and he never apologized for the problem. Even though the thank-you note was handwritten, it was as impersonal as a mass-produced letter that starts with "Dear Customer."

If you train your employees to routinely do things without understanding the subtleties and context of their actions, you run the risk that they'll do the right things the wrong way.

Here are some of the most common customer service rules, explanations of when to break them, and alternative best practices to apply instead.

### **Rule One: Always use the customer's name.**

Dale Carnegie said, "The sweetest sound in any language is the sound of one's own name." Although it may be true that using a customer's name can create a sense of intimacy, it can also have the opposite effect. Watch out for the following mistakes:

#### **1. Using the customer's name too often**

"Well, Bob, you can see that this is the perfect solution for your business. Don't you agree,

Bob? After all, Bob, studies have shown this to be true. And Bob..." Overusing your customer's name may make him or her uncomfortable and seem like an insincere gimmick rather than a true connection.

#### **2. Mispronouncing your customer's name**

Some people have names that are hard to pronounce or have unusual pronunciations. In either case, it is always good to ask the proper way to pronounce someone's name. Once you've heard the proper pronunciation, it's essential that you pronounce it correctly. Customers may forgive you for not saying their names right the first time, but it will still grate on their nerves to hear their names repeatedly pronounced incorrectly.

#### **3. Being too formal or informal when using your customer's name**

Some people prefer to use their first names; some prefer honorifics such as Mr., Miss, Ms., Mrs., Ma'am, Sir, etc. It is far more respectful to start off formally and let your customer tell you his or her preference.

**Best Practice:** Use your customer's name in a way that shows respect and begins to build rapport.

### **Rule Two: Always shake your customer's hand.**

For decades, salespeople have been taught to shake hands in order to connect and build trust and rapport with their customers. However, there are a number of situations where offering a handshake can create more tension than trust.

#### **1. Cultural issues**

There are cultures and religions in which hand shaking is either forbidden or considered rude. If you are dealing with a multicultural customer base, learn all you can about the appropriate ways to greet and welcome them.

#### **2. Social anxiety**

For some people, the mere thought of having to shake hands creates a level of tension that can ruin the entire interaction.

#### **3. People with compromised immune systems**

In 1918, the town of Prescott, Arizona, outlawed hand shaking to slow down the spread of the flu epidemic. Many people have been told by their doctors that they should not shake hands in order to protect

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their fragile immune systems. There are also perfectly healthy people who are afraid of the germs that can be transmitted by a handshake.

**Best Practice:** Instead of initiating the handshake, it is better to wait until your customer makes the first move. Keep your arms relaxed but ready to respond. If your customer starts to shake your hand, you can easily reach out and grasp his or her hand in return.

### **Rule Three: Always send a handwritten thank-you note.**

In this impersonal business world, a handwritten note will help you stand out and make a great impression, but sometimes a note can have the opposite effect.

#### **1. Sending a thank-you note before a problem is successfully resolved**

As in the opening story, don't send a thank-you note if your customer has an unresolved problem. Don't send a note unless it's an apology rather than a thank-you.

#### **2. Impersonal note**

A perfunctory "thank you for doing business with us" can fall flat like a form letter, ruining whatever connection you may have with your customer.

**Best Practice:** Although a handwritten note is still somewhat personal in its nature, you need to take it a step further by writing something unique that relates to each customer. Your note should include references to what you have spoken about with the customer.

### **Rule Four: Follow the golden rule.**

From the time we were children, we have been taught to follow the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Following this rule can create a number of problems:

#### **1. Treating your customer in a way that makes him or her uncomfortable**

It is somewhat egocentric to assume that your customer has the same wants and desires that you do. For example, if you are a gregarious person who likes lots of conversation and connection, you risk pushing your customer away if that kind of treatment makes him or her uneasy.

#### **2. Missing an opportunity to surprise and delight**

When you only use yourself as a reference regarding what would impress your customer, you lose the ability to be nimble and creative. When you listen carefully to your

customer, he or she will give you clues about what you can do to go the extra mile.

**Best Practice:** Use the platinum rule: "Treat others the way they want to be treated." This ensures that your customer will be treated in a way that meets his or her needs.

The bottom line to all these rule breakers and best practices is to keep your customer service personal. Don't just follow the rules; choose the best way to apply them to meet and exceed your customer's needs.

### **About the Author:**

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