

21 Key Customer Service Skills (and How to Develop Them)



It doesn't matter how great your product is: If your customer service is poor, people will complain about it, and you'll lose customers.

The good news: It's not impossible to turn things around. Transforming your customer service from mediocre to great won't happen overnight, though. It requires a serious commitment to meaningful change, a team of rockstar support professionals, and work across the entire organization.

What is customer service?

Customer service is the act of providing support to both prospective and existing customers. Customer service professionals commonly answer customer questions through in-person, phone, email, chat, and social media interactions and may also be responsible for creating documentation for self-service support.

Organizations can also create their own definitions of customer service depending on their values and the type of support they want to provide. For example, at Help Scout, we define customer service as the act of providing timely, empathetic help that keeps customers' needs at the forefront of every interaction.

Why is customer service important?

When 86% of customers quit doing business with a company due to a bad experience, it means that businesses must approach every support interaction as an opportunity to acquire, retain, or up-sell.

Good customer service is a revenue generator. It gives customers a complete, cohesive experience that aligns with an organization's purpose.

According to a variety of studies, U.S. companies lose more than \$62 billion annually due to poor customer service, and seven out of 10 consumers say they've spent more money to do business with a company that delivers great service.

Understanding that customer service is the cornerstone of your customer experience helps you leverage it as an opportunity to delight customers and engage them in new, exciting ways.

What are the principles of good customer service?

There are four key principles of good customer service: It's personalized, competent, convenient, and proactive. These factors have the biggest influence on the customer experience.

- **Personalized:** Good customer service always starts with a human touch. Personalized interactions greatly improve customer service and let customers know that your company cares about them and their problems. Instead of thinking of service as a cost, consider it an opportunity to earn your customer's business all over again.
- **Competent:** Consumers have identified competency as the element that plays the biggest role in a good customer experience. To be competent, a customer support professional must have a strong knowledge of the company and its products, as well as the power to fix the customer's problems. The more knowledge they have, the more competent they become.
- **Convenient:** Customers want to be able to get in touch with a customer service representative through whichever channel is the most convenient for them. Offer support through the channels of communication your customers rely on most, and make it easy for customers to figure out how to contact you.
- **Proactive:** Customers want companies to be proactive in reaching out to them. If one of your products is backordered or your website is going to experience downtime, proactively reach out to your customers and explain the problem. They may not be happy about the situation, but they will be thankful that you kept them in the loop.

By building your customer service strategy around these four main principles, you'll create a positive, hassle-free customer experience for everyone who deals with your company.

Customer service tips by business type and industry

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- [B2C customer service](#)
- [SaaS support](#)
- [Customer service in healthcare](#)
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21 key customer service skills

While delivering consistently good customer service requires work and alignment across your entire organization, a good place to start is your support team. It's important to hire people who genuinely want to help your customers succeed — and to pay rates that are attractive to skilled professionals.

Finding the perfect hire for a support team can be challenging. No particular checklist of job experiences and college diplomas adds up to the perfect candidate. Instead, you're looking for qualities that can't necessarily be taught.

These folks thrive on one-on-one interactions within their community. They love problem solving. They're warm, approachable, and great at teaching other people how things work.

Here are the 21 customer service skills that every support professional should seek to develop and every leader should look for when hiring new team members.

1. Problem solving skills

Customers do not always self-diagnose their issues correctly. Often, it's up to the support rep to take the initiative to reproduce the trouble at hand before navigating a solution. That means they need to intuit not just what went wrong, but also what action the customer was ultimately after.

A great example? If somebody writes in because they're having trouble resetting their password, that's ultimately because they want to log into their account.

A good customer service interaction will anticipate that need and might even go the extra mile to manually perform the reset and provide new login details, all while educating the customer on how they can do it for themselves in the future.

In other situations, a problem-solving pro may simply understand how to offer preemptive advice or a solution that the customer doesn't even realize is an option.

2. Patience

Patience is crucial for customer service professionals. After all, customers who reach out to support are often confused and frustrated. Being listened to and handled with patience goes a long way in helping customers feel like you're going to alleviate their current frustrations.

It's not enough to close out interactions with customers as quickly as possible. Your team has to be willing to take the time to listen to and fully understand each customer's problems and needs.

3. Attentiveness

The ability to truly listen to customers is crucial to providing great service for a number of reasons. Not only is it important to pay attention to individual customers' experiences, 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 (specific function), again?"

You have to be attentive to pick up on what customers are telling you without directly saying it.

4. Emotional intelligence

A great customer support representative knows how to relate to anybody, but they're especially good with frustrated people. Instead of taking things personally, they intuitively understand where the other person is coming from and they know to both prioritize and swiftly communicate that empathy.

Think about it: How often have you felt better about a potential grievance simply because you felt immediately heard by the other person involved?

When a support rep is able to demonstrate sincere empathy for a frustrated customer, even just by reiterating the problem at hand, it can help to both placate (the customer feels heard) and actively please (the customer feel validated in their frustration).

5. Clear communication skills

Your customer support team is on the front lines of problem solving for the product itself, and serves as a kind of two-pronged bullhorn.

On one side, they'll be the voice of your company to your customers. That means they have to have a practiced grasp on how to reduce complex concepts into highly digestible, easily understood terms.

On the other, they'll represent the needs and thoughts of customers to your company. For example, it doesn't behoove the customer to receive a long-winded explanation on the ins-and-outs of solving a particular bug.

The ability to communicate clearly when working with customers is a key skill because miscommunications can result in disappointment and frustration. The best customer service professionals know how to keep their communications with customers simple and leave nothing to doubt.

6. Writing skills

Good writing means getting as close to reality as words will allow. Without an ounce of exaggeration, being a good writer is the most overlooked, yet most necessary, skill to look for when it comes to hiring for customer support.

Unlike face-to-face (or even voice-to-voice) interactions, writing requires a unique ability to convey nuance. How a sentence is phrased can make the difference between sounding kind of like a jerk (“You have to log out first”) and sounding like you care (“Logging out should help solve that problem quickly!”).

Good writers also tend to use complete sentences and proper grammar — qualities that subtly gesture toward the security and trustworthiness of your company.

Even if your company offers support primarily over the phone, writing skills are still important. Not only will they enable your team to craft coherent internal documentation, they signify a person who thinks and communicates clearly.

7. Creativity and resourcefulness

Solving the problem is good, but finding clever and fun ways to go the extra mile — and wanting to do so in the first place — is even better.

It takes panache to infuse a typical customer service exchange with memorable warmth and personality, and finding a customer service rep who possesses that natural zeal will take your customer service out of “good enough” territory and straight into “tell all your friends about it” land.

Chase Clemons at Basecamp advises the following:

“You want to have somebody who you don’t have to give a lot of rules and regulations to. You want to have somebody who is talking to a customer and understands ‘Their boss is really yelling at them today. This person is having a really bad day. You know what? I’m going to send them some flowers to brighten things up.’ That’s not really something you can teach. They have to go the extra mile naturally.”

8. Persuasion skills

Oftentimes, support teams get messages from people who aren’t looking for support — they’re considering purchasing your company’s product.

In these situations, it helps to have a team of people with some mastery of persuasion so they can convince interested prospects 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!

9. Ability to use positive language

Effective customer service means having the ability to make minor changes in your conversational patterns. This can truly go a long way in creating happy customers.

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

For example, let's say a customer contacts your team with an interest in a particular product, but that product happens to be back-ordered until next month.

Responding to questions with positive language can greatly affect how the customer hears the 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 could be taken the wrong way by customers — especially in email support when the perception of written language can skew negative.

Conversely, the second example is stating the same thing (the item is unavailable), but it focuses on when and how the issue will be resolved instead of focusing on the negative.

10. Product knowledge

The best customer service professionals have a deep knowledge of how their companies' products work. After all, without knowing your product from front to back, they won't know how to help when customers run into problems.

All new Help Scout employees, for example, are trained on customer support during their first or second week on the job; it's a critical component of our employee onboarding process.

According to Help Scout's 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 an understanding of their experience so that you can become their strongest advocate."

Mitigating gaps in product knowledge

It takes time for team members to build up their product knowledge. And if you have a very complex product, it may take your team members years to learn every one of its ins and outs. However, the right customer support tool can help you mitigate those gaps in product knowledge.

For example, with [Help Scout](#), you can:

- Create a database of [saved replies](#) that support agents can use to answer frequently asked how-to questions about your product.
- Search your help center articles and [insert links to them in responses](#) without ever leaving the conversation view.
- Set up [automated workflows](#) that attach helpful internal notes to conversations with instructions on how to reply.
- [Search all previously sent responses](#) by keyword, tag, and more to see if someone else on the team has already answered the question.

Whether you're using Help Scout or [one of its alternatives](#), make sure you browse the features available to help your teams deliver exceptional customer service.

11. Acting skills

Sometimes your team is going to come across people who you'll never be able to make happy.

Situations outside of your control (such as a customer who's having a terrible day) will sometimes creep into your team's usual support routine.

Every great customer service professional needs basic acting skills to maintain their usual cheery persona in spite of dealing with people who are just plain grumpy.

12. Time management skills

On the one hand, it's good to be patient and spend a little extra time with customers to understand their problems and needs. On the other hand, there is a limit to the amount of time you can dedicate to each customer, so your team needs to be concerned with getting customers what they want in an efficient manner.

The best customer service professionals are quick to recognize when they can't help a customer so they can quickly get that customer to someone who *can* help.

13. Ability to read customers

It's important that your team understands some basic principles of behavioral psychology in order to read customers' current emotional states. As Emily Triplett Lentz writes:

“I rarely use a smiley face in a support email when the customer’s signature includes ‘PhD,’ for example. Not that academics are humorless, it’s just that :) isn’t likely to get you taken seriously by someone who spent five years deconstructing utopian undertones in nineteenth-century autobiographical fiction.”

The best support pros know how to watch and listen for subtle clues about a customer's current mood, patience level, personality, etc., which goes a long way in keeping customer interactions positive.

14. Unflappability

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.

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 customers who think the world is falling apart as a result of their current problems.

15. Goal-oriented focus

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 and 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.

16. Ability to handle surprises

Sometimes, customers are going to throw your team curveballs. They'll make a request that isn't covered in your company guidelines or react in a way that no one could have expected.

In these situations, it's good to have a team of people who can think on their feet. Even better, look for people who will take the initiative to create guidelines for everyone to use in these situations moving forward.

17. Tenacity

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

The most 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 follow the standard process when it came to helping someone out.

18. Closing ability

Being able to close with a customer as a customer service professional means being able to end the conversation with confirmed customer 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 before all of their problems have been addressed is the last thing that customers want, so be sure your team knows to take the time to confirm with customers that each and every issue they had was entirely resolved.

19. 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.

20. A methodical approach

In customer service, haste makes waste. Hiring deliberate, detail-oriented people will go a long way in meeting the needs of your customers.

One, they'll be sure to get to the real heart of a problem before firing off a reply. There's nothing worse than attempting a "solution," only to have it miss the mark entirely on solving the actual issue.

Two, they'll proofread. A thoughtfully written response can lose a lot of its problem-solving luster if it's riddled with typos.

Three, and this one may be the most important, it means they'll regularly follow up. There's nothing more impressive than getting a note from a customer service rep saying, "Hey! Remember that bug you found that I said we were looking into? Well, we fixed it." That's a loyal, lifetime customer you've just earned.

An important side note: The best hires are able to maintain their methodical grace under regular fire.

Since the support team is often tasked with the tough work of cleaning up other people's messes, it's especially important they understand how not to internalize the urgency — and potential ire — of frustrated customers. Instead, they know how to keep a cool head and a steady, guiding hand.

21. Willingness to learn

While this is probably the most general skill on this list, it's also one of the most important. After all, willingness to learn is the basis for growing skills as a customer service professional.

Your team members have to be willing to learn your product inside and out, willing to learn how to communicate better (and when they're communicating poorly), willing to learn when it's okay to follow a process — and when it's more appropriate to choose their own adventures.

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 who are willing to invest in their own skills.

What if someone on your team is lacking these skills?

What if you're leading a team of support professionals who aren't open to improving their approach to customer service? What if they lack the skills above and don't seem to be interested in developing them? Help Scout's Mathew Patterson offers a solution in [this video](#).

Often, the root cause of what could be perceived as a lack of skill or unwillingness to learn is the result of a work environment (current or prior) that didn't reward going above and beyond to provide excellent service.

Try providing your team with some clear guidelines for what you expect and some examples of what great customer service looks like at your company in a way that brings to bear all of these skills, and as you do it, make sure that you're celebrating those small wins as you see people starting to use these skills.

Once your team starts to see that their efforts are being acknowledged and rewarded, you'll have people start to get more engaged, and you'll have a clearer picture of whether or not there are actually people on your team who have real skill gaps that you need to work on.

The evolution of customer service

As [Seth Godin wrote](#), customer service means different things to different organizations, but things aren't going to end well for the companies who simply see customer service as a "cost-cutting race to the bottom."

Gary Vaynerchuk echoes that sentiment in [The Thank You Economy](#), where he outlines the evidence that there is profit and growth for any company that openly communicates with its customers in an effort to make them feel appreciated and valued.

The bottom line: Great customer service is a growth center, not a cost center. It's really that simple.

Try Help Scout

If you're looking for a customer communications platform that is everywhere your customers are, Help Scout offers a 15-day free trial and provides all of the [resources](#) needed to help you deliver quality customer support.

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