

CONNECTING WITH CUSTOMERS

Micah Solomon

“DEVELOPING A TRUE CUSTOMER FOCUS IS FAR AND AWAY THE MOST EFFECTIVE, AFFORDABLE WAY TO KEEP THE REVENUE FLOWING.”

Building customer engagement, one customer at a time, is one of the most straightforward and sustainable ways to grow a company.

It's also the most cost-effective. For comparison: How much did you spend on marketing last year? Advertising? Sales? Developing a true customer focus is far and away the most effective, affordable way to keep the revenue flowing.

Why You Need a Culture-Driven Customer Service Turnaround

I'm a customer experience consultant and customer service turnaround expert, and when a call comes for my services, it's often from a business that was once thriving but that has since lost its way with customers. The first thing I do after arriving on-site is pore through whatever records and relics I can find from those earlier, happier days, looking for hints as to what might have changed.

What I'll find, nearly invariably, are clues suggesting that the care taken with customers in those early, golden days was superior to that taking place now in a variety of predictable ways, including

- The level of personalization in each customer interaction
- The number of customer follow-ups and the care invested in each one
- The thought that went into hiring, onboarding and supporting the employees who represent your company to every customer they encounter.

Unfortunately, the focus and attentiveness that are common when a business has only a few customers tend to slide when the customer roster begins to balloon. Employees stop signing their thank-you notes by hand. Managers busy themselves with paperwork in their office hideaways rather than coming out into the open to greet even longtime or VIP customers—and they're certainly nowhere to be found if a customer conflict ever erupts and needs smoothing over. Your receptionists start to rush through calls, or they even find themselves replaced by an automated “voice jail” system.

THE TRAIT SHARED BY EVERY SUCCESSFUL CUSTOMER-ORIENTED COMPANY

Is such a lowering of standards inevitable? Decidedly not—if you stubbornly stick to your guns. The mantra that’s needed—and that’s shared by every successful customer-oriented company—is this: If you did something for your first customer, you find a way to keep doing it for your 10,000th, without rushing, without cutting corners and without doing anything that would make a customer feel less than fully valued by your business.

THE KEY TO CUSTOMER SERVICE SUCCESS

Accomplishing this consistent service excellence ultimately comes down to culture. Because the reality is that it’s impossible for even the most attentive leader to attend on a micro level to all the possibilities for service to go sideways. That’s where building a great customer service culture comes to the rescue.

AFTERWORD: THE IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CUSTOMERS AS WELL AS EMPLOYEES

The current health and economic crises are having a variety of effects on customer engagement. Here are three points to be aware of:

- With the elimination of important traditional touchpoints (in-person interactions, handshakes, shopfront windows and so many others), the remaining touchpoints now represent your opportunities to shine. Everything—your tone of voice on a phone call, the messaging in your emails, your smile on a video call and your engagement in beautiful “chef’s kiss” messaging, such as sending actual physical cards to your customers—matters more than ever.
- Nearly everybody is feeling new and heightened stress. An important principle to keep in mind in your interactions with customers is to *help even when you can’t help*. In other words, even though you can’t solve a customer’s or employee’s financial, childcare or health challenge, for example, your friendly ears and empathy may be of greater value than you know—if you rise to the occasion.
- Be gentle on yourself as well. The economy needs you—and so do your customers—so take time to treat yourself right.



These HP Printables were created for you by Micah Solomon, customer service consultant, trainer and training designer and the author of Ignore Your Customers (and They’ll Go Away). Micah helps businesses of all sizes improve their customer service, and he would love to hear from you directly at micah@micahsolomon.com or (484) 343-5881. His website is micahsolomon.com.

DEFINING CUSTOMER SERVICE CULTURE

My definition of “customer service culture”—the practical, working definition I use on the jobsite—is as simple as one and two (there’s not even a three). Your customer service culture, for better or worse, has two primary elements:

1. The way your company treats its customers
2. The way your company treats the people whose job it is to take care of these customers: employees as well as vendors and subcontractors

The fundamental complication with this two-part definition is that there may not be an all-the-time way that you treat your customers or an all-the-time way that you treat your employees, vendors and subcontractors. So, to get the full measure of a culture, we’ll need to subdivide items 1 and 2 and look separately at the following:

- How you treat your customers, employees, vendors and subcontractors on a normal, stress-free day (when money is flowing, nobody’s called in sick, and you’ve got your most experienced team working)
- How you treat these entities when you are under stress (when you’re facing tight resources, hurricanes or other freakish weather on the horizon, demanding customers, intensive shareholder demands, difficult personal times for yourselves as employees and leaders, and so forth). In the figure below, the goal is for the treatment in all four boxes to be equally positive.

THE SOLOMON SERVICE CULTURE MATRIX™

HOW WE SERVE OUR CUSTOMERS WHEN STRESS IS LOW	HOW WE SERVE OUR CUSTOMERS WHEN STRESS IS HIGH
HOW WE TREAT OUR EMPLOYEES AND VENDORS WHEN STRESS IS LOW	HOW WE TREAT OUR EMPLOYEES AND VENDORS WHEN STRESS IS HIGH

CREATING A CUSTOMER SERVICE CULTURE

FIVE STEPS TOWARD CREATING A CUSTOMER SERVICE CULTURE

Here are five steps to take to establish and sustain a customer service culture:

1. Define your purpose in a sentence or two.
2. Set down a short list of principles that are fundamental to your desired culture.
3. Express your cultural expectations at every possible junction, from recruitment onward.
4. Introduce and diligently maintain a repeating ritual for cultural reinforcement.
5. Develop an obsession with talent management.

ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL DEFINITIONS OF PURPOSE THAT I KNOW OF IS THE ONE THAT GUIDES MAYO CLINIC:

THE NEEDS OF THE PATIENT COME FIRST.

MAYO CLINIC'S STATEMENT IS EXCEPTIONALLY BRIEF (SEVEN WORDS), USES LANGUAGE THAT IS EASY TO UNDERSTAND (THE ONLY WORD LONGER THAN ONE SYLLABLE IS THE CENTRAL WORD, "PATIENT") AND IS CLEAR IN THE EXPECTATIONS IT LAYS OUT FOR EVERYONE WHO WORKS THERE.

1. Define your purpose in a sentence or two. Write down the purpose of your business, and describe the type of behaviors you'll be expecting from every associate, manager and executive in your organization. This statement of purpose should be written in clear language, short enough to be memorable and long enough to be meaningful.

2. Set down a short list of principles that are fundamental to your desired culture. These should represent a sort of Constitution or Bill of Rights for what your culture will be. I suggest that you limit yourself to no more than 10 or 12 essential principles. Here are a few examples:

- We value every individual's input and creativity.
- We respond both to the stated requests of our customers and to opportunities to serve them in ways they may not directly request.
- Service is the responsibility of everyone here.

3. Express your cultural expectations at every possible juncture, from recruitment onward.

When you're hiring, let potential employees know, *from the first moment they come in contact with your organization, what matters most in the culture you are striving to create.* Then continue to convey these expectations while onboarding employees and thereafter. Take a moment below to write down a few key employee touchpoints where you would be able to communicate and reiterate your cultural expectations:

4. Introduce and diligently maintain a repeating ritual for cultural reinforcement. Setting up the framework for a great service culture is only the start. *Reinforcing* it is what ultimately makes the difference. Your best hope for having your service culture persist over time is to find an opportunity to reinforce your cultural focus every single day. While not exactly a ritual, it can be extremely valuable to develop an abbreviated version of the principles you've developed in step 2 and typeset them onto an accordion-fold business-card-size piece of collateral. This is phenomenally effective at, quite literally, keeping everyone on the same page. And its roots are legendary; the founders of the modern-day Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company introduced such a "credo card" Think about what such a "credo card" could look like for your business, and what information from Questions 1 and 2 you would write on it. Add your notes to the lines below, and then find a way to bring it to life and distribute it to your employees so they have something to refer to every single day.

5. Develop an obsession with talent management. "Talent management" is the term I use for the recruitment, selection and development of employees. As much as anywhere, this is where culture lives or dies. It's essential that you implement a successful approach and mindset for finding, keeping and developing employees who have an affinity for service: employees who are selected for their interest in and suitability for your company purpose and whom you support and guide in their further development. What are some ways you can instill an affinity for service among your current employees? What are some things you will look for in future new-hires? Write your ideas below and refer back to them while managing talent from end-to-end

DEFINING CUSTOMER SERVICE CULTURE

THE SOLOMON SERVICE CULTURE MATRIX™

Now it's your turn. Fill out each square in the matrix below, thinking about how your company treats different stakeholders at different times. Are your answers mostly the same? Or are they massively different from one square to the next? Use the results of this exercise as a conversation starter for your leadership team. Ideally, you will be able to transform your culture such that each square of the matrix says the same thing.

HOW WE SERVE OUR CUSTOMERS WHEN STRESS IS LOW	HOW WE SERVE OUR CUSTOMERS WHEN STRESS IS HIGH
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