PERFECT PHRASES™

for

CUSTOMER SERVICE

second edition

COMPLETELY REVISED AND UPDATED

Hundreds of Ready-to-Use Phrases for Handling Any Customer Service Situation

Robert Bacal

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**Hundreds of Ready-to-Use Phrases for
Handling Any Customer Service Situation**

Robert Bacal

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Preface to the
Second Edition

T his might be the most boring book on customer service you will ever come across. And if you're in customer service you need this book, because I guarantee you it will help you! It may not entertain you. If you want that, rent a movie.

It will, however, make you a better customer service provider, and it will make you safer and help reduce stress from difficult customer situations.

You've probably seen those commercials for the cough syrup brand that tastes so bad? It's a fun ad campaign and it's memorable. One remembers the simple fact that the cough syrup works. This book is like that. It might taste a little bad, but it works great.

In a short customer review of the first edition of this book, a reader said he thought the book was deadly dull. Authors don't like that. I didn't like it. Then I was asked to write the second edition of this book—the one you hold in your hand. Now I had to read the original book, and darned if I had to agree. It's boring!

The other thing I noticed (and this was reflected in other more detailed reader reviews) was that the content is really really good. OK. I'm biased, but seriously, there's much in this book

you won't find elsewhere. The examples are thorough and clear. The explanations are straightforward. It's been six years since the original book, and there wasn't a single technique or customer service strategy that could be removed. The practical hands-on guidance on what to say when is still way ahead of anything else out there on the market.

Only it's still boring. Yes, a fair amount of the text was edited and improved. Yes, we added a new section on social media, and it's a wee bit less boring. Not quite the potboiler, though. Never will be.

This book isn't meant to be read like a novel. It's a reference book and a tutorial, and you can pick and choose the sections you want when you need them. As such, there's some duplication to ensure that you don't need to read it from beginning to end to learn from it.

I'm very pleased to be writing this introduction to the second edition of this book since it means that enough people found the first edition useful enough to justify updating it. Since 2005 when the first edition of this book was published, many things have changed in the customer service arena. But many aspects of customer service remain the same. Great customer service is still one of the most effective ways to hold on to your customers and ensure they'll do business with your company in the future. And doing a good job providing customer service can still provide you with a great sense of satisfaction and job enjoyment. The most compelling reason to learn about and deliver good customer service is this: When you deliver good customer service to your customers, you experience less stress, and less hassle and grief from customers. They argue less. They're much less likely to insult you, and they're less demanding. They don't threaten you even though they're unhappy ("I'll have your job!"). You can save huge

amounts of time. Customer service skills still help you keep your happy customers happy and help prevent customers from becoming unhappy and taking out their frustrations on you.

So what about the changes? The biggest apparent change has been the emergence of social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and others) as "places" where millions of customers and potential customers "hang out" and share things. One of the things people can share much more easily now is their positive and negative experiences with companies. When things go wrong, they yell. When things go right, they whisper. The implications of this behavior coupled with the apparent huge numbers of people (which may be a bit of an overstatement) using these platforms has companies jumping on the bandwagon. Large companies like IBM, Ford, Dell, and HP are "there," and many small or micro-sized businesses are also experimenting (and usually failing) at the use of social media for customer service. Whether these changes are good or bad, there's no question that those involved in customer service need to understand the new media so they can use them effectively, both at a strategic and a tactical level (that is, communicating with customers).

This brings us to the most significant changes in this edition. We'll help you understand what social media can be used for, and how you can use them to offer improved customer service. Yes, we'll offer you phrases to use, but we'll explain to you how to strip away the hype from the truth so you won't waste resources. You'll understand not only what you can accomplish via social media, but also what you can't accomplish. The goal: intelligent, effective use of social media, without wasted resources.

Quick Overview of the Book

The focus: to give you the tools to interact with customers more effectively, so the company, the customer, and you—the person dealing with the customer—all benefit. It's a different kind of book about customer service. It's not full of principles or platitudes or handy customer service slogans. It focuses on doing. What should you do with a customer who is swearing at you? What do you do to prevent customers who have waited a long time from getting really angry? What do you do to provide advice to customers so it will be heard and appreciated? This book answers these questions, and many others about customer service situations—specifically and precisely. This book is about solutions.

Organization

Part One of this book has two chapters. In Chapter 1, we'll cover some basics, so you can increase your understanding of what customers want from you, and the things that cause customers to hit the roof. We'll talk about various types of customers (internal and external, paying and nonpaying), and we'll explain how you can best use this book.

Chapter 2 describes dozens of very specific customer service strategies, listed in alphabetical order. The explanations included here will help you decide when to use what techniques and in what customer situations. It's very important that you read and understand this chapter because doing so will enable you to modify your responses to fit each situation. You can't serve customers by memorizing phrases and regurgitating them. You must understand why and when they fit, and modify them to suit your situation.

In Part Two, we describe 60 common and not-so-common customer service situations along with specifics for dealing with

each one them. Even if we haven't included all of the situations you deal with on the job, you can modify the solutions to fit the situations you do face. Regardless of whether you work in retail, the hospitality industry, government, or as a call center customer service rep, the situations and solutions will be very useful to you.

In Part Three you'll find brand-new content to help you make use of and benefit by using social media platforms to communicate with and provide customer service to your customers. We'll give you some explanations about social media, mention critical differences between different platforms, and present you with six more customer service situations/functions and how you carry them out on social media. We end the chapter with more uncommon insight into social media and their limitations as customer service tools.

Conclusion

Far too much customer service training and far too many customer service books tell you only what you already know. Do you really need to be told again that you should smile? Or shake hands? No. But you might find it useful to know when it's a bad idea to smile at a customer. You'll learn that from this book.

Here's the bottom line about this book: You may come across a few things you already know. You'll also come across techniques you probably haven't thought about. If you work at using these techniques properly, and focus on doing things that result in win-win-win for you, the customer, and your company, you'll be better at your job, better at customer service than less-informed people, and you really will help your employer and yourself be more successful. As a big bonus, you'll save yourself a lot of hassle and grief.

The Customer Service Zone Website

I've created a website called the Customer Service Zone, where you will find hundreds of articles on customer service. Use of the site is free of charge. It's one of the best free Internet resources on customer service in the world, and more than one million people have visited. Come by and you can have your say, comment, and ask questions. To visit, go to www.customerservicezone.com and continue to learn about and develop your customer service skills.

Acknowledgments

I continue to be grateful to McGraw-Hill for providing the opportunity for my books to exist. Specifically, I'd like to thank Brian Foster for suggesting this revision.

As usual, John Woods of CWL Publishing Enterprises has helped in many ways make this book what it is. Bob Magnan, formerly of CWL, has worked on many of my books and made material contributions to the earlier edition of this book. Marg Sumner and Kelly Kagamas Tomkies did the proofreading and added value on nearly every page.

Finally, my wife, Nancy, has to put up with all the angst and craziness from me that always accompanies a book project. Thank you, and thank you for taking on additional responsibilities so I could concentrate on getting this book done.

Part One

Succeeding at Customer Service

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Chapter 1
Basics of Customer Service

There must be a billion words written about customer service. Advice abounds, from the banal and obvious (smile when you talk on the phone) to complex and difficult suggestions about how to "create a corporate culture of excellent customer service."

Amid all the words, simple or fancy, is a basic hidden truth about customer service: the person who interacts directly with the customer determines whether that customer perceives that he or she is receiving poor customer service, excellent service, or something in between. If you serve customers directly, you have the power to affect their perceptions. That customer contact is where "the rubber meets the road."

If you provide service to customers, your words and behaviors are the tools you use to create a positive customer perception of you and the company you work for. Whether you're a novice working with customers or a seasoned pro, what you do and say will affect how customers see you. You can't help it. Customers will form opinions, so you might as well learn how to create positive opinions. But you need to know how to do that.

It might be that you get paid minimum wage and you don't plan to stay in your customer service job. Why care what customers think? The answer is simple—self-interest! Customers who form negative opinions about you can make your life miserable. When they get angry, they complain, slow down service for others (making *them* mad), threaten, swear, and otherwise do things that add stress to your job. In some cases, their anger can escalate to the point where your physical safety is at risk. All because you couldn't be bothered or didn't care. It's to *your* benefit to provide decent customer service just for these reasons. More on what's in it for you in a moment.

That's what this book is for—to teach you about the dozens and dozens of techniques you can use when interacting with customers so they'll walk away with positive feelings about the experience. You'll learn about very specific things you can do or say in all kinds of customer interactions. You'll learn how to deal with difficult customers. You'll learn how to approach customers and how to get information from them so you can do your job. You'll learn to deal with customer service problems quickly, efficiently, and professionally. Best of all, the techniques in this book will fit your needs, whether you serve burgers, staff the desk in a hotel, help people in health care environments, or even work for the government.

This book will tell you exactly what to do and say, and it will provide you with numerous examples so you can use customer service techniques effectively.

Let's get started!

What's in It for Me?

Why should you be concerned with providing excellent customer service? You don't own the company. You may not get

paid more for providing excellent customer service. So, what's in it for you?

There are three powerful reasons for learning to provide great customer service: greater job satisfaction, reduced stress and hassle, and enhanced job success.

First, very few people derive any job satisfaction when they feel that the time they spend at work is "wasted." Most of us need to feel useful and productive—to make a difference, whether it's helping a fast food customer make healthier food choices or dispensing legal advice. When you provide high-quality customer service, you feel that you're making that difference and can derive pride in your work. The day goes faster.

When you do a good job with a customer, such as calming down someone who's angry and complaining, you feel good about having achieved something. Perhaps more important than your own perceptions are the customer's perceptions, when you do a good job with a customer and he or she tells you what you've achieved. That feedback helps you feel good about yourself and your performance. Doing a good job and taking pride in how you serve customers are ways to prevent job burnout.

Second, deliver quality customer service and you will save yourself a lot of stress and hassle. When you learn and use customer service skills, you are far less likely to get into protracted, unpleasant, and upsetting interactions with a customer. You make yourself less of a target for customer wrath. That's because customer service skills help keep customers from becoming angry and reduce the length and intensity of the anger when and if difficult customer service situations occur.

Third, learning and using quality customer service techniques helps form the perceptions of those who may be able to help your

career—supervisors, managers, and potential employers. Using these techniques makes you look good to everyone, and that's critical in getting promoted, receiving pay raises, and getting new job opportunities. Managers and supervisors notice when a customer asks for you specifically because you do such a good job or comments positively about how you've helped.

Of course, you may have other reasons to want to provide the best customer service possible. You may want to contribute to the success of your employer. You may like the feeling of having other employees look up to you as a good model. Or you may even benefit directly if you work on a commission basis. In many jobs, people who are good at customer service earn more.

Regardless of your reasons, quality customer service techniques can be learned, and you can learn them with a little effort.

In the rest of this chapter, we'll provide an overview of customer service principles and issues and explain how to use this book. In the next chapter, we'll describe 60 techniques you should be using. The rest of the book is dedicated to showing you how to use those techniques.

Different Kinds of Customers

Before we continue, we should clarify what the word "customer" means.

You're probably familiar with our starting definition: the *customer* is the person who pays for goods or services that you provide. This definition works in some contexts, but not all. It breaks down in situations where money doesn't directly change hands. For example, people often interact with government, public schools, and other organizations. They receive goods or services from them, but do not pay anything directly to them. We need to

change our definition so that people who interact with these organizations fall under our definition of customer, since they, too, deserve high-quality customer service, even if they aren't paying directly.

Here's a better definition: the *customer* is the person next in line who receives your output (service, products). That person may purchase goods or services directly or receive output you create or deliver without direct payment. The person may be outside your company, but this definition also includes anyone within the company who receives output from you.

There are four basic types of customers. Regardless of type, each customer deserves to receive top-quality customer service, and each can make your work life miserable if you don't provide it.

First, there are external paying customers. These are the people who pay to eat in a restaurant, pay for health care and legal advice, or pay to stay in a hotel.

Second, there are internal customers. These are people who receive output (services, products, information) that you create or provide, but who are in the same organization as you. Internal customers may be billed via interdepartmental charge systems, or there may be no payment system in place. For example, human resources staff members involved in hiring employees, in effect, work for internal customers (the managers of the work units needing new employees). The technician who maintains company computers works for internal customers (the people who use the computers he or she maintains).

Third, there are external nonpaying customers. These customers receive services, goods, or other outputs but don't directly pay for them. For example, the tourist who visits a traveler's information kiosk by the highway may receive tourist information

(outputs) and maps (goods), but doesn't pay directly. That tourist is a customer. Another example is the parent who attends the parent-teacher meeting at the local public school. He or she receives outputs and services from the teacher, but doesn't pay the teacher directly. That parent needs to be treated like a customer, too.

That brings us to the fourth type of customer, regulated customers. Government organizations interact with people in ways that aren't oriented toward providing something to individuals, but are involved in regulating them for the common good. It might seem like people regulated by the government through licenses, zoning regulations, permits, and other controls are really not customers. We want to include them, however, because even though government regulates them, they still deserve the best possible levels of customer service. Including this group under the term *customer* reminds us (and, hopefully, government employees) that even when employees are telling people what to do or what they are allowed (or not allowed) to do, they need to apply principles of customer service. This applies to border guards, immigration officials, health inspectors, building code enforcers, and to every position you can imagine in the public sector.

First Things First—Dispelling an Important Customer Service Myth

We need to address the single most popular false idea about customer service. It's a great slogan, credited to H. Gordon Selfridge, who passed away in 1947. No doubt you've heard the phrase, "The customer is always right." Unfortunately, it's wrong and misleading.

Basics of Customer Service

Clearly the customer is not always right. Customers make unreasonable requests and have unreasonable expectations. Customers sometimes even play fast and loose with the truth. Customers may not understand your company and what you can and can't do for them.

Practically speaking, you can't operate under the assumption that the customer is always right. You can't give every customer what he or she asks for.

Can we come up with a phrase or two that realistically describe how we should treat customers? Yes. Here are two short phrases that fit the bill.

- The customer always deserves to be treated as if he or she is important and his or her opinions, needs, and wants are worth your attention.
- The customer deserves to receive maximum effort of those serving him or her, even when the customer's expectations, wants, and needs may be impractical.

Since the customer isn't "always right" and it's often not possible to give the customer what he or she wants, what are the implications for customer service?

It's simple. The customer has other important wants and needs besides getting what he or she is asking for. Even in situations where you can't do what the customer asks, you can contribute to development of the customer's positive impression about how he or she is treated. That's what we've captured in the two phrases above. We need to focus not only on what we provide to the customer, but on how we provide it. That's the key to realistic, excellent customer service. To do that, you need to understand these other wants and needs—and that's where we're going to go next.

Understanding What Customers Want

One thing about the customer service techniques you're going to learn: you can't succeed with them by memorizing them or using them in every situation. The key to customer service is doing the right thing at the right time.

To be able to choose the right techniques and to use them effectively, you have to understand what customers want. Knowing this will help you make sense of the techniques you'll be looking at. Below is a list of the most important customer wants and needs. When you address these, you create positive customer perceptions about you and your company. That means fewer arguments, fewer hassles, and better customer relationships. Customers want:

- problem solved
- effort
- acknowledgment and understanding
- choices and options
- positive surprises
- consistency, reliability, and predictability
- value (not necessarily best price)
- reasonable simplicity
- speed
- confidentiality
- sense of importance

Customers want their problem solved. They want to get what they want from you, whether it's a product, service, or other output. This is the customer service "want" that most people are familiar with. However, it's not always possible to give the customer what he or she wants, which is where the rest of the

"wants" come in. Even if you can't solve the customer's problem, you can create positive perceptions by addressing the other, less obvious customer wants.

Customers expect that you (and your company) will make an effort to address their problems, concerns, and needs, even if you can't give them what they want. Customers respect effort, often pay attention to effort above and beyond the call of duty, and will turn on you (create hassles) if they sense that you aren't making an effort. Many of the techniques you'll learn later in this book work because they demonstrate "effort above and beyond the call of duty."

Customers want and expect to have their wants, needs, expectations, feelings, and words acknowledged and understood. That means listening and proving to the customer that you have "got" what he or she is saying. Customers who feel understood and acknowledged feel important, and that's a vital part of good customer relationships.

Customers also want to feel they have choices and options and are not trapped by you or your company. They want to feel they can decide and that you're helping them, rather than the other way around. When customers feel helpless or powerless, they're more likely to become frustrated, angry, and aggressive.

Customers also appreciate "positive surprises." Positive surprises are things you do that go above and beyond their hopes and expectations (going the extra five miles). They include offering discounts or providing some other benefit that's normally unavailable to them. Positive surprises are most useful when dealing with difficult or angry customers.

Consistency, reliability, and predictability are also important customer wants. Customers expect that you will treat them in a

consistent way and that you'll always do what you say you'll do. By acting in accordance with these wants, you provide the customer with a sense of security and confidence in both you personally and in the company. This builds loyalty.

Customers also expect value for their investments of time and money. What's interesting here is that while money (price) is part of the value equation, it's only a part. When customers look at value, they also take into account how they're treated, the quality and expertise of the advice they receive from you to help them make decisions, and a number of other factors. You may not be able to affect the price of services or products you provide, but you can add value by helping the customer in other ways.

Reasonable simplicity is another important customer want. These days many people are overwhelmed by a complex world. If you complicate the customers' world or make them jump through a number of hoops, they will become frustrated and angry. One of your customer service roles should be to make things easier for the customer, not more complicated, without oversimplifying or treating the customers in a condescending way.

Speed and prompt service are also important. At minimum, customers want you to make the effort to help them quickly and efficiently. They also expect that you will not create situations that have them waiting around unnecessarily. While you may not always be able to control how fast a customer is served, you can convey a sense that you're working at top speed.

Confidentiality is an important aspect of customer service. Clearly customers want you to keep their sensitive information to yourself, but it goes further than that. Customers also want a degree of privacy even when talking to you about what may seem to be a

mundane or nonsensitive issue. Customers may feel uncomfortable if there are other staff or customers crowding around them.

We've left the most important need for last. Customers need the sense that they are important. Many of the above wants tie into this. Listening to and acknowledging customers demonstrates that you believe they are important. So does arranging for pleasant surprises or making an effort. Many of the specific phrases and techniques you're going to learn tie directly into helping the customer feel important.

How to Get the Most from This Book

There is no "right" way to use this book, so you'll need to find what works for you. Here are some suggestions you might find useful.

Some people will prefer to read the book from cover to cover, which can be effective. We suggest that you read the first and second parts carefully before you move on to the specific dialogues and examples, since doing so will help you make sense of the specific applications of the techniques.

However, you may prefer to browse or to look for specific solutions to specific customer service situations that are particularly relevant to you. That's fine, too.

To be systematic and organized about learning customer service techniques, you might want to cover one example a day. Each day you can spend five minutes on a particular example, then try to use the techniques in your work. You can learn in small bits, which keeps you from being overwhelmed and will actually improve your learning and retention.

Hints

We've tried to include dialogues and examples from many professions and job types. The specific techniques for customer

service are universal and apply across almost all customer situations. Even if the examples don't pertain directly to the kind of work you do, you'll learn how the techniques in the examples can and should be used. Don't be put off if the example isn't quite perfect for your job. Adapt it as necessary.

When you look at the techniques and examples, keep in mind the relationship of the technique to the customer wants and needs we've just explained. Think about how the techniques can be used to help the customer understand that you believe he or she is important and that you're making an effort. That will help you understand the proper use of the techniques.

For Those Wanting to Help Others Learn Customer Service Skills

Managers, supervisors, and trainers may want to use this book as a basis for training others in customer service skills. The design of this book makes it easy to do so, since it's short, concise, and modular. Learners need not be exposed to the entire book at one time or in one training session. Individual skills can be covered quickly, even in short lunchtime meetings or staff meetings.

Finally, we regularly publish new customer service material at The Free Customer Service Resource Center on the Internet at http://customerservicezone.com. It's a great place to visit, interact, and learn.

Time to look at the tools of customer service—the things you can do and say to deal effectively with customer service situations that run from the basic and simple to the very challenging and difficult.

Chapter 2
Customer Service Tools and Techniques

There are tools and techniques for every trade and profession. Carpenters have their hammers, saws, and screwdrivers, and must know how to use them properly. Plumbers have their pipe wrenches, pipe cutters and benders, and the rest. Other professionals—accountants, doctors, psychologists, and so on—also have tools and techniques they need to master. Customer service reps are no different, although their tools are less tangible. The tools and techniques of effective customer service have to do with what employees say and do with reference to each customer.

Top-notch customer service employees can match each tool to the requirements of specific situations. When you understand the tools and the basics of customer service from Chapter 1, you can choose the right tools for each customer service "job."

In this section, we will describe and explain each of the major customer service strategies at your disposal. Since customer service involves human interactions that aren't always predictable, using these tools won't guarantee the positive result we

might want. However, use these tools and you'll increase the chances of a successful interaction with each customer, whether that customer is currently happy or is angry and upset.

Since Part Two contains numerous examples of how to use the customer service techniques and tools, the descriptions in this section are relatively short. You'll find that in real life it won't always be easy to determine whether a "perfect phrase" is part of one customer strategy or another. Phrases can actually fit multiple strategies. Don't worry about what a strategy is called. Try to understand how the strategy works and how you will use it or modify it to improve customer service.

Strategies are presented in alphabetical order.

Above and Beyond the Call of Duty

Going above and beyond the call of duty means doing something that you don't have to do. It's doing something extra. Customers, even difficult ones, often display extreme gratitude and loyalty when you demonstrate that they are so important that they're worth going beyond what's required. That's one of the secrets to good customer service—demonstrating through your actions that your customer is important and special.

Acknowledge Customer's Needs

When customers see you make an effort to understand their needs (even if you can't meet them), it's more likely they will view you positively. Acknowledging needs may involve rephrasing something the customer has said to you (for example, "I understand that you want to get the best value for your money"), or it may involve responding to something you observe about the customer (for example, "I can see that you must be in a hurry").

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Acknowledge Without Encouraging

When you deal with an angry or difficult customer, it's important to prove to him or her that you understand the facts surrounding the situation and the feelings the customer is experiencing. The catch is that "what you focus on, you get more of"—and you don't want to encourage the customer to continue difficult or angry behavior that interferes with helping him or her. "Acknowledge Without Encouraging" really involves the combination of two techniques.

The first set involves using both empathy statements and refocus statements together. First, you acknowledge the feelings in a short sentence, and without stopping, you refocus or steer the conversation back to the problem and away from the customer's emotions.

Similarly, you can do the same thing around demonstrating your understanding of the facts of the customer's situation by combining active listening with refocusing. Reflect back your understanding of the customer's situation, and then refocus back to problem solving.

The important thing to remember is the principle. You need to acknowledge the facts of the situation and the emotions, but you don't want to dwell on them. Focusing on them results in longer interactions that tend to be more emotional.

Active Listening

Active listening proves to the customer that you're paying attention and that you believe the customer and what he or she has to say are important. It involves rephrasing the key points of what the customer has said and reflecting them back to the customer, often in the form of a question. For example: "So, you're

saying that you're sure there are parts missing from the product and you want a complete refund. Is that right?"

Admit Mistakes

People in general—and, of course, customers in particular—tend to respect those who are honest and open about mistakes and who take rather than avoid responsibility. When mistakes occur, it's often good strategy to admit to the mistake, whether you made it personally or the company you represent made it. Even if you're not completely sure where the problem occurred and who caused it, admit to the possibility of a mistake. This avoids unnecessarily provoking a customer by representing yourself or the company as infallible.

When admitting mistakes, use very short sentences and then move on to solving whatever problem exists.

Allow Venting

You're probably familiar with the concept of venting. By allowing the customer to let off steam uninterrupted, the idea is that the customer will eventually calm down on his or her own. While this may work, you should know there are two types of people. Venters are people who will calm down if allowed to let off steam. Obsessors, however, will get angrier and angrier the more they talk about their upsets or grievances.

If you allow a person to vent and find that she or he is getting more and more agitated, additional active measures are needed, such as empathy statements, attempts to refocus, neutral mode, and so on.

Apologize

A sincere apology can help calm a customer, particularly when you or your company has made an error. You can apologize on behalf of your company. Keep in mind that tendering an apology doesn't necessarily mean that you're admitting responsibility. As with admitting a mistake, your apology should be "short and sweet," followed by refocusing on solving the problem or addressing the customer's needs.

Perfunctory or insincere apologies are worse than saying nothing at all and tend to anger customers. Also, due to a general overuse of the words "I'm sorry," apologies aren't as powerful as you might think. They should always be used along with other techniques.

Appropriate Nonverbals

Nonverbals are body language. Customers decide whether you're paying attention to them and want to help based on whether you look at them when you speak (or listen), and whether you stand or sit in an attentive posture. If you fidget, look away or at your watch, or seem distracted, they will believe you're in a hurry to get rid of them.

Appropriate Smiles

Most customer service training stresses the importance of smiling. There's no question that a warm smile is valuable. However—and it's a big "however"—smiles (and other facial expressions) must fit the situation. For example, if a customer is exceedingly upset about how she has been treated, showing a huge smile and chuckling will be inflammatory and might even provoke violence. Smiles need to be appropriate to the situation and the cus-

tomer's state of mind. Smiling at the wrong time can send the message that you aren't taking the customer seriously.

Arrange Follow-Up

Not all customer problems can be addressed right away. Many require follow-ups or additional communication. For example, if you don't have an answer to a customer's question, you might find the answer and call the customer back within a few minutes. Proper follow-up tells the customer he or she is important to you.

Arranging follow-up should include three things: (1) explaining what you'll do between now and the actual follow-up, (2) giving a specific time by which you will get back to the customer, and (3) offering a choice as to the form and timing of the follow-up (for example, you call back, you send an e-mail, the customer calls you). Needless to say, when you arrange a follow-up, you must be able to fulfill your promise—and you must do so.

Ask Probing Questions

This technique refers to the use of a series of questions to clarify a customer's needs, feelings, and wants and the facts of his or her situation. Probing questions are simple ones that cover an issue at a time so as not to overwhelm the customer. A probing question is directly related to the customer's answer to the previous question. Probing questions invite the customer to clarify or add to his or her previous response.

For example, "What brought you in today?" is a question. An alternative is to break this down by first saying, "I see you are browsing the plasma TV sets. Are you interested in more information about them?" If the customer says "yes," the employee probes deeper by asking, "Do you have an interest in a particular

size of TV?" The interaction may continue this way, with the employee asking simple questions in a series, basing each question on the responses to earlier questions.

Apart from this being an important tool for getting good information from a customer, it shows that you're listening, since you're basing each question on the specifics of a customer response.

Assurances of Effort

As mentioned earlier, when customers don't feel you're making an effort, they get angry. On the flip side, when customers feel you're making an effort above and beyond the call of duty, they're less likely to target you for angry behavior if they can't get what they want.

An assurance of effort is a statement that tells the customer you'll do your best to meet his or her needs. For example: "I can see you're in a hurry and I'm going to do my best to get this wrapped up in a few minutes."

Notice that an assurance of effort is different from an assurance of results. You can always assure the customer that you will try, even if you don't yet know if you can give the customer what he or she wants.

Assurances of Results

An assurance of results is a stronger statement than an assurance of effort: it promises that the customer will have his or her problem resolved. An assurance of effort doesn't promise results, so it can be used in almost any situation. Assurances of results should be made only when you can legitimately guarantee the results you are promising.

Audience Removal

Some angry customers will "play to the audience" in public situations where others are present. You can tell this is happening by observing whether the customer seems to be looking to other customers or bystanders for approval or talks to them. Removing the audience involves arranging for the customer to be served away from the audience, usually in an office space. Here's an example of how to do it: "Mr. Jones, I'm sure you'd prefer that your privacy is protected, so let's go to the office and we can continue there."

Bonus Buy Off

This technique involves offering something of value to the customer as reimbursement for inconvenience or other problems. The offer need not be of significant monetary value, since the point is to be perceived as making an effort. It's used primarily when the organization has made an error, but it can also be used when there is no error and the employee wants to make a goodwill gesture.

Broken Record

This technique is used primarily with customers who won't work with you to solve their problems. Its intent is to send the message: we're not going to continue the conversation until we deal with the specific issue that I want to deal with.

It involves repeating the message, but in different words, until the customer starts to work with you. For example: "You have several options. [Describe them.] Which would you prefer?"

If the customer ignores this, you repeat the message, but in different words: "You can [option one] or [option two]. Do you have a preference?"

The same message can be repeated four or five times, until the customer finally chooses one.

This technique can also be used for expressing empathy, with a customer who is too angry to engage in specific problem-solving.

Close Interactions Positively

A relatively simple technique to end conversations, "Closing Interactions Positively," usually involves offering pleasantries (for example, "Thanks for coming in" or "I appreciate your patience and apologize for the delay"). You want to end each interaction, even if it's difficult, on a positive note. Warning: No sarcasm is allowed. That will rekindle the flames of anger.

Common Courtesy

Common courtesy refers to behaviors based on consideration and politeness in your country or area. They're basic and you probably know what they are, but it's important not to lose sight of the importance of using "please" and "thank you," creating an inviting environment for your customer/guest and using civil language. You can add your own ideas to what constitutes common courtesy for the people you serve.

Even with such simple techniques, there are important points to keep in mind. When you're stressed or rushed you might tend to stop using common courtesy. It's a natural mistake. In trying to address the customer's needs quickly (being task-oriented), it's easy to forget that how you interact with the customer is always important. You need to use common courtesy even when you're rushing to meet the needs of your customer, unless it's an emergency situation. A health emergency is one example where common courtesy may delay critical actions, such as calling 911.

Also, remember that you need to use common courtesy most in situations where you least feel like it. Difficult and obnoxious customers tend to push employees to respond rudely or at least curtly. Unfortunately, when you neglect common courtesy, problems escalate, so it's in your interests to be polite and courteous, even with the people you feel don't deserve it. It isn't about who deserves common courtesy, but what will work and reduce the time you waste. It's *all* about what works.

Complete Follow-Up

Obviously, when you arrange a follow-up, you need to complete the follow-up. This also applies when your boss initiates the request—following up on his or her behalf. In that situation you contact the individual, identify yourself, explain why you're following up, and request any information you need. Respond to the customer's problem/issue as needed. Then report back to your supervisor if required.

Contact Security/Authorities/Management

Most employees aren't trained in security, self-defense, or other methods for dealing with a violent, highly disruptive, or potentially violent customer. If it's not your job, it's not your job. Don't take on the responsibilities of security staff or the police. When faced with violent situations or security threats, contact security personnel, management, and/or the police. Do that *first*. If your company has a policy on this issue, follow it. Don't chase customers or attempt to apprehend them. This strategy also applies in situations where someone has made some sort of threat to you personally or to the company. At minimum, notify your manager

immediately. Remember that safety is your first priority—for yourself, your colleagues, and other customers.

Disengage

Disengaging is a technique most often used with a difficult or aggressive customer. It has several purposes: it serves to temporarily halt a conversation that's getting increasingly emotional and unpleasant, and it's used if a conversation is going around in circles.

Disengaging means taking a break from the interaction to allow both parties to calm down or think more clearly so that, when the conversation resumes, it's more like a "fresh start." In a situation where the conversation isn't likely to result in success, offer a reason to stop and resume in a minute or two or after an even longer interlude. For example, you might say, "Mr. Smith, let me take a minute to check your file," and then suspend the conversation while you go check. You can also take the more direct approach, as follows: "Mr. Smith, maybe we both need a break so we can approach this fresh. How about if we resume this discussion tomorrow? We can set up a time that's convenient." This technique can be used in person and on the phone.

Disengaging is similar to using "Timeout." A timeout is used to allow the customer to calm down by giving him or her an opportunity to be alone. Disengaging is a conversation break that doesn't require the customer to be alone.

Distract

Use this technique with angry customers to shift their attention away from their anger. It's designed to break the anger cycle. It works like this: direct the customer's attention to a physical object with words and a gesture, so the customer needs to break

eye contact with you. Here's an example: "If you'll take a look at the computer screen [swivel monitor and point to a specific spot on the monitor], you'll see that we have your policy expiration date as November 6. That's where the problem is."

Any physical object—brochures, forms, signs—can be used, but the object should have some relevance to the issue being discussed.

Empathy Statements

Empathy statements are used as the primary response to any situation where the customer is upset or frustrated or may get frustrated or angry in the future. They prove to the customer that you understand his or her emotional state and why he or she is feeling that way. You need not agree with why a customer is angry. Just show that you understand. The two things are different. Here are some examples:

- It seems like you're pretty upset by the delay.
- I know it can be frustrating to have to complete these forms.
- You must have been pretty upset that the product doesn't work.

Here's the key to effective empathy statements. Be specific. Name the emotion—anger, frustration, upset—and identify the source of the emotion—the delay, forms, product failure. Avoid general statements like "I see where you're coming from."

Expedite

Expedite means "making things go faster." In other words, give the impression that you're doing things to speed up whatever process the customer is trying to get done. You can convey this by talking more quickly and emphatically, while clearing away

barriers that are slowing down progress toward getting what the customer wants.

Expert Recommendations

Customers don't always know what they want or need. They may be confused about what to do next. Recent research indicates that customers want customer service people to *simplify* things for them. Providing expert advice or recommendations about products and/or simplifying things so the customer can efficiently accomplish what he or she wants is invaluable.

Before giving advice or recommendations, it's always good to ask the customer if he or she would like you to provide it. Here's a key point. When you give advice or make a product recommendation, explain why you think a specific product or action would be best for the customer. Provide pros and cons and a balanced recommendation, but highlight benefits of products and not just the fancy features or bells and whistles. Keep it simple unless the person shows a desire to have a more complicated explanation.

Explain Reasoning or Actions

It's easy to assume that a customer will understand why you're doing something or why you're saying what you're saying. That's a mistake. The customer isn't going to be familiar with your company, policies, and procedures, or at least not as familiar as you are.

Explain what you're doing for the customer and why you're doing it. Customers want to understand what's going on and can get frustrated or even frightened when they don't understand. Here's a simple example: "I'm going to [explain action] so that you'll be entered in the computer. Then next time you come in things will go much faster."

Face-Saving Out

Embarrassing or humiliating a customer is always a bad thing, even in situations where the customer has made a stupid mistake or is angry and unpleasant. Providing a face-saving out is a way to avoid embarrassing a customer, blaming a customer, or pointing out a customer error or deficiency.

The best way to explain is through example. Let's say a customer appears not to understand what an employee has told him, and, even though the employee has given him written material to help him understand, he's still not getting it. The employee could say, "Well, if you read the material you were given, you would understand." That has potential to show up the customer, particularly if that person has difficulty reading, which is not uncommon. Instead, the employee can offer a face-saving out as follows: "Perhaps the written material isn't very clear or I haven't explained myself well, so let me see if I can talk you through this, since it can get complicated." This removes the blame component by moving responsibility to the employee, while trying not to point out any reading comprehension problems the customer might have.

Find Agreement Points

When the customer sees you as being "on the same side," he or she is much less likely to strike out at you. One common technique often used in hostage negotiations to create a sense of "we're in it together" involves looking for things the customer says with which you can agree. Even expressing agreements on small points, like the weather or other topics unrelated to why you're talking to the customer, can create a better sense of rapport.

Finish Off/Follow Up

Related to "Arrange Follow-Up," described earlier in this section, following up or finishing off is the process of getting back to a customer to tie up loose ends, confirm that a problem has been solved, or obtain feedback from the customer. When contacting a customer to follow up, it's standard to introduce yourself, explain why you're making the contact, and ask permission to continue or ask if this is a good time. Following up is an extremely important way to show the customer that he or she is valued and his or her opinions and satisfaction matter.

Isolate/Detach Customer

Isolating or detaching the customer is another name for removing the audience effect (when the customer plays to other customers or bystanders) and provides an opportunity for the customer to think more calmly about the situation and how he or she is behaving. The key issue is to provide time for the customer to think and reflect. See "Timeout" for more details.

Level

Level means being honest and forthright without blaming and strong emotion. It's similar to what some call assertive communication. It may involve expressing your feelings about a customer's comments in a calm way or pointing out a customer error in a nonblaming way. It's not a primary customer service technique, except in situations where you have a long-term relationship with a customer that you want to both keep and build. It's best used with customers you know well and you know will respond positively to open and honest communication. It's not recommended for customers you don't know well.

Manage Height Differentials/Nonverbals

This describes a family of actions you can take when a customer is intruding into your personal space or using a height advantage and/or body language to intimidate or put you off balance. If you're standing and the customer moves into your space, pivot so you're at a 90-degree angle and not face-to-face. If you are seated and the customer is standing, it's best to stand. (Get up slowly and calmly.) Often coupled with the distraction technique, the idea is to create a comfort zone for yourself and to move the emphasis from a confrontational position (face-to-face) to a more cooperative one. With customers who use height differentials and enter your personal space, it's better to use these indirect techniques to manage the situation than to make it an issue by verbally focusing on the space issue.

Manage Interpersonal Distance

We all have comfort zones when it comes to our interpersonal space. When a person is too close, it can cause us to feel uncomfortable or even threatened and intimidated. All of those feelings make it more difficult to serve the customer. While customers will sometimes enter your interpersonal space intentionally (that is, get in your face) because they're angry or frustrated, it may also be unintentional.

Interpersonal space boundaries are both cultural and individual. Some cultures tend to have small interpersonal space, and people get closer when they talk. Within cultures, individuals differ. What may be uncomfortable for you may be comfortable for the other person.

Be that as it may, manage interpersonal distance so you're comfortable. Be aware of the space boundaries of your customers.

Don't get too close. If the customer moves backwards or looks away for no apparent reason, you should increase your distance.

If the customer is too close to you, you can use the "90-degree angle" techniques outlined in "Managing Height Differentials/Nonverbals." You can increase distance by directing the person's attention to something (a product or information) that requires the customer to move away from you. Or, of course, you can step away. If you step away, you should do so in a way that sends the message you're stepping toward something and not away from the client. Walk toward a product you're pointing to or to pick up a file. It's a subtle difference. When you seem to be stepping toward something, it seems less obvious to the customer that you're stepping away from him or her. That's less likely to make interpersonal distance a focal point of your conversation.

Whenever possible, don't make an issue of interpersonal space by referring to it directly and verbally. You really don't want to spend time talking about who is standing where. There are exceptions; for example, when you're concerned about your physical safety and nothing else works. However, if you do feel physically threatened, your priority would be to extract yourself from the situation immediately.

Not Taking the Bait

One of the simplest techniques, and one of the most important when dealing with an angry customer, "Not Taking the Bait," means not responding to insults, comments, innuendo, or other angry or abusive comments made by a customer. Typically, you can respond indirectly (using empathy statements). The key thing to understand is that if you focus on or even simply acknowledge a customer's unpleasant comments, you're going

to spend more time arguing and talking about those comments than you would if you simply ignored them or responded with empathy statements. An essential tactic, "Not Taking the Bait" requires some self-discipline. Remind yourself that the unpleasant customer shouldn't be allowed to upset you or ruin your day. Don't lower yourself to the level of an insulting customer.

Offering Choices/Empowering

One of the major reasons customers get upset is that they feel helpless in the face of policies, procedures, red tape, and other things they perceive are beyond their control. You can counter this feeling by offering choices to customers whenever possible. By offering them choices, you also show respect for their wishes and help them exert some positive control over the discussions, how and when they occur, and related issues. Even simple things, like offering someone a choice of coffee or tea, can create rapport and prevent conflict escalation.

Plain Language

It's easy to forget that our customers don't necessarily understand the jargon, acronyms, and terms that we use every day and take for granted. Using plain language involves translating our language into language that the customer can understand.

For example, a computer technician might use the term *LCD* to refer to a liquid crystal display computer monitor with other technicians, but this term may be foreign to most casual computer users. Some will know it, but some will not, so it's good to anticipate this. The phrase "computer monitor," is a much more familiar term. In addition, the technician should be prepared to explain even that term in simple language. For example, "the computer monitor is the

device that you look at when you use the computer." In this example, the technician would use the latter explanation only if the customer seemed to not understand "computer monitor," so as not to insult the customer's knowledge and intelligence.

Another example: A human resource professional might be comfortable using terms like *401(k)*, *compensation*, and *spousal benefits*, but those terms may not be completely clear to an employee. So, the HR employee could replace *401(k)* with *company retirement account*, *compensation with salary*, and *spousal benefits with medical insurance for your wife and children*. The idea is to focus on clarity and simplicity without being patronizing and to remember to communicate for the benefit of the customer, not yourself.

Preemptive Strike

The term *preemptive strike* is borrowed from the military. In customer service, it means anticipating a problem a customer might have and addressing or acknowledging it before the customer brings it up. For example, if a customer has been waiting a long time, apologize for the wait or use an empathy statement *before* the person complains to you. This shows you understand and care about the customer's frustration. By mentioning the problem first, you demonstrate that you understand and are concerned about the customer's feelings. This technique can go a long way toward preventing interactions from escalating.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Customers are concerned about keeping their business and their conversations private. Be aware that this can be the case even when no personal information is discussed. When dealing with

details a customer might want kept between the two of you, make sure you talk in an environment where you can't be over-heard. Make it clear to the customer that you're taking steps to protect his or her privacy and confidentiality. Here's a tip: Some customers want to ensure that their information remains private, even if the information is not what most of us would consider personal. Offer reassurance about privacy and confidentiality, even in situations that might not seem to demand it. If there is no private area, simply do your best.

Pros and Cons

Customers see you as more credible or believable when you pre-sent both the pros and cons of a product or service in a balanced way. For example, when describing a particular product, it's much better to include both its strengths and its weaknesses relative to other products, rather than to present only its strengths or only its weaknesses. The same applies when explaining any options a cus-tomer might have to choose from. Keep in mind that when you present a one-sided view, the customer will wonder why you're pre-senting what may appear to be an unbalanced perspective and will question or suspect your motives. For example, he might think you get a higher commission on one product compared to the other.

Provide Alternatives

Similar to "Offer Choices/Empowering," this is a simple technique to present alternative products, services, or actions that might apply to the customer's situation. For example, "You can contact me by phone or e-mail, whichever is more convenient" provides two alternatives to the customer. What's the difference between offering choices, as described earlier, and offering alternatives?

When you offer choices, you usually ask the customer which alternatives he or she wants to pursue. Providing alternatives demonstrates your interest in ensuring that the customer understands his or her options. It's informational and doesn't require an answer from the customer.

Provide a Customer Takeaway

"Provide a Customer Takeaway" involves giving something physical to the customer to take away, as a bonus or, more often, so he or she has information that can be referred to after your interaction. For example, you might provide a brochure, product information, a written phone number that a customer needs, or a list of steps for a customer to solve a problem, and/or a case number to refer to if the problem continues. Takeaways can also be brief summaries of a conversation. When you provide a takeaway, you're not forcing the customer to rely on his or her memory. If you don't have printed material available, you can jot down notes for the customer to take away. Customers see this as helpful and feel that you are going the extra mile.

Provide Explanations

You may be surprised by the idea that employees tend to take for granted that customers understand what they are saying. It happens all the time. Providing explanations means exactly this: you explain. Here's an example. A customer wants to return some underwear, but your store does not accept such returns for hygienic reasons. You could assume this is obvious, which would be a mistake, or you could explain the reasoning by talking about why your store has that policy, referencing any laws that might apply or that the policy exists to protect every customer.

When you educate a customer, that person usually becomes a better customer, easier to serve, and more loyal.

Question Instead of State

Questions can be used to soften a statement or command. Let's say a customer has a complaint. You could say, "Go down the hall and speak to our customer service branch." But that statement sounds harsh, because it's a command. People don't like to be ordered around. Instead, use a question to soften the situation: "Were you aware that you can speak to our customer service branch, and they'll be able to help you?" In effect you're saying almost exactly the same thing, but the question form comes across as more cooperative and avoids the impression that you're ordering the customer around.

Refer to Supervisor

There are situations when you can't help a customer because you lack the authority or information to do so. There are other situations where a customer, usually angry, will respond more politely if he or she can talk with someone perceived as having more status in the organization—a manager or supervisor. We know that when a customer talks with a supervisor or someone else with more status, he or she tends to behave more civilly than with someone seen as having less status.

Whether you can't help due to lack of authority and information or whether you feel the customer will respond more positively with a supervisor, the techniques used are the same. First, ask or confirm that the customer wants to speak with the supervisor. Second, contact the supervisor and explain the situation to him or her. Normally you would provide the supervisor

with the customer's name, the problem or issue, and the customer's general state of mind. This step ensures that the supervisor isn't blindsided, eliminates the need for the customer to explain the entire situation, and allows the supervisor to take control of the interaction when he or she makes contact with the customer.

Finally, the supervisor "connects" with the customer. This might involve the supervisor introducing himself or herself as follows: "Hello, I'm Ms. Jones, and I understand you have some concerns about your billing." Whether the supervisor initiates contact in person or on the phone, the procedure should be the same.

It's imperative that you and your supervisor are on the same wavelength for referrals. Some supervisors don't ever want customers referred to them. Some are willing under certain circumstances, and others are more open. You need to know what your supervisor expects—and the time to find out is not when you have an angry customer waiting. Ask your supervisor when it's OK to refer customers and how he or she wants the process handled. Then abide by those wishes.

Refer to Third Party

This technique resembles "Refer to Supervisor" except that the person who receives the customer isn't a supervisor, but someone else in the organization, often a coworker. Third-party referrals are useful when someone else may know more about the subject at hand than you do, or when you believe that someone else, because of his or her personal style or approach, might work more effectively with a specific customer. Referring to a third party can also be used when a supervisor is unavailable.

The process works the same way, except that you present the third party as someone who is expert or knowledgeable, to enhance his or her perceived status. For example: "You might prefer to talk to John Angus. He's the person who knows the most about [subject of interest to customer]." Again, ensure that you inform the third party about the customer's situation before he or she interacts with the customer.

Refocus

Refocusing a conversation means bringing it back to the original issue or topic. Let's say an angry customer has a complaint about a product or service. He talks about the problem, but then sidetracks, making critical remarks about the company or about you personally. Those comments aren't going to help the customer resolve his concern. Couple an empathy statement with a refocus statement as follows: "I can see you're angry about the product problem. Let's get back to what we can do to help you. I can suggest a few things that might work." Shift the customer's attention away from his anger and toward something more constructive.

Set Limits

You set limits in situations where a customer is acting in nonconstructive ways. The customer might be raising his or her voice, swearing, or making repeated nuisance phone calls. To help the customer (and keep your sanity), encourage the customer to stop the inappropriate or destructive behavior. There are several parts to setting limits.

The setting limits process uses an "if . . . then" statement. In that statement identify as specifically as possible the behavior you want to stop. You also identify the consequence that will occur if the cus-

tomer doesn't stop. It goes like this: "If you don't stop swearing, then I'm going to have to end this conversation." Here, the behavior is "swearing" and the consequence is "end this conversation."

But you aren't finished yet. The next step is to provide a choice statement. So after the "if . . . then" step, you add, "It's up to you whether you'd like to continue."

This step is included because we want the customer to understand that he gets to decide whether to stop swearing and continue the conversation, or continue swearing and end the conversation. By framing it as a choice for the customer, the consequence seems less like punishment and something the employee does to the customer.

Handle the entire process of setting limits and enforcing them calmly, to avoid personalizing the process.

If the customer agrees to the limit, then the conversation can continue. If the customer continues to swear or argue, then the conversation must be terminated. Here's what you would say on the phone. "I'm going to end this conversation now. You are welcome to call back at some other time." You include the last sentence to tell the customer that you'll be glad to help at some other time—provided that he stops swearing. Once you've indicated you're ending the conversation, you'll do so unless the customer offers a clear apology or commitment to abide by the limit you set.

Before using limits to end interactions, you should be clear about your organization's policies and wishes regarding what constitutes reasonable grounds for ending an interaction or refusing further service. Also remember that setting and enforcing limits should be a last resort. Use it only after other techniques have failed to encourage the customer to act more constructively.

Some People Think That (Neutral Mode)

"Neutral Mode" is an indirect way to acknowledge something a customer has said without agreeing or disagreeing with it. That's why it's called "Neutral Mode." Because it's an unusual, novel, or unexpected response, the technique tends to interrupt the flow of anger or emotion and causes the customer to stop and think. This provides the employee with an opening to use other techniques.

This technique has a specific form. If you change it, it doesn't work as well. It goes like this: "Some people do think that [rephrase what the customer said in a straightforward way]."

Let's say a customer is going on and on about how inefficient the government is. The employee, wanting to interrupt the flow, or rant, says, "You know, some people do feel that the government isn't as efficient as it might be."

Notice that the employee didn't say "wastes money" or "squanders money" or any other stronger, emotionally laden words. That's important. Always rephrase in a neutral, unemotional way.

When the technique works, the customer will respond with a short sentence or two, then stop. Then the employee uses other techniques to intervene and get control over the conversation. The two most important techniques to use following a "Neutral Mode" statement are "Empathy Statements" and "Refocus."

Stop Sign–Nonverbal

Do you need to get an in-person customer to stop and listen? You can use the nonverbal stop sign to indicate you'd like to say something. The technique is simple, but you need to execute it correctly. Hold up your hand toward the customer, with the palm facing half toward the floor and half toward the customer. In

other words, your hand should be at about a 45-degree angle. Ensure that you are far enough away from the customer that there will be no risk of physical contact. Keep your hand no higher than the customer's chest level, not in his or her face.

This technique should not be used with any customer who appears potentially violent. Also, the stop sign should be raised slowly, not abruptly, and it can be coupled with a simple verbal request, such as, "Hold on a sec."

Suggest an Alternative to Waiting

This technique is an extension of the "Provide Alternatives" technique mentioned earlier. When customers are waiting—let's say in a doctor's waiting room—the longer they wait, the angrier they get. One reason is they don't know what to do. Do they have to stay in the waiting room or if they step out for a moment do they risk losing their places? Can they go somewhere and come back? Is there time to grab a cup of coffee?

If you are in charge of the waiting room, it's good to explain the reasons for the delay and suggest things customers might do while they wait. Or, indicate they can reschedule if waiting is a problem. A very useful example goes like this: "For those of you with appointments after 3 o'clock, feel free to step out for a coffee break or snack in the restaurant next door. Just be sure to be back within a half-hour of your scheduled appointment and you won't lose your spot."

Summarize the Conversation

A simple technique used either in the middle or at the end of a conversation, this involves doing a quick recap of the critical parts of the discussion. Summarize the important details, partic-

ularly any specific commitments you and/or your customer have made during the conversation.

Summarizing shows that you're paying attention, but there's a more important reason to use it. It's not uncommon during conversations for both parties to believe that they understand what's being said in exactly the same way. If misunderstandings aren't caught, serious problems can arise. Summarizing allows you to confirm with the customer that both you and he or she understand what has been said in the same way.

Summarizing verbally can be accompanied by providing the customer with a takeaway—a written summary of the conversation.

Telephone Silence

It's sometimes hard to get someone on the phone to be quiet and listen to you, so you can offer help. Some people talk incessantly when they are upset, angry, frustrated, or frightened. One of the best ways to get a customer to stop talking over the phone is to say absolutely nothing. No words. No "Uh-huh." Nothing. The customer will stop and ask, "Hello, hello, are you there?" and then wait for a response from you. That gives you an opening to use other techniques and get some control over the conversation.

If you have a mute button, that works even better because it blocks out all sounds, including background noise. Do not put a customer on hold in this situation. Putting a customer on hold means you can't hear him or her or know when the person has stopped talking. You wouldn't be able to jump into the gap to take some control of the conversation. The mute button lets you hear the customer, but the customer can't hear you or any background noise.

Thank-Yous

One of the most obvious and simple techniques needs little explanation. Everyone likes to be thanked. Thank people. One tip: Don't just say, "Thank you." Be specific. For example, "Thank you for being so patient" or "Thank you for visiting our company."

Timeout

You might be familiar with timeouts in relation to children who are acting out. The principles are similar for adults: the timeout can provide a cooling-off period for customers who are upset or angry, particularly if their anger is getting in the way of you helping them. Provide some sensible reason why the customer should wait on his or her own for a minute or two, preferably in a locale away from other people. For example, if you were in an office with a customer, you could say, "I need to check to make sure what I'm saying is accurate. Let me do that. It'll just take a minute." Then exit, leaving the customer alone. Return in a minute or two.

Most angry customers are regular people who are upset and act aggressively only temporarily. When you give them the chance to think about what they're doing, they will often apologize to you and act more constructively.

It's important to keep the timeout short. If it goes past a few minutes, that may provide an additional reason for the customer to escalate the anger. It's important to understand that timeouts, at least for adults, aren't punitive. They're meant to provide time to think.

Use Customer's Name

Another simple technique requires little explanation. Using the customer's name personalizes the service you provide and indi-

cates you think the customer is important enough for you to remember his or her name. There's another advantage: It indirectly suggests that you know who he or she is. Anonymity tends to increase aggression.

It's sometimes difficult to know how to address a customer. With a woman, do you use Ms., Mrs., or Miss? When do you use a first name? The best way to find out is to ask how a customer would prefer to be addressed. First names are best used with customers you know well. Also, forms of address are cultural. Ask.

Use of Timing with Angry Customers

We've included this technique because timing is so important when dealing with angry customers. It's not a technique as much as something you should be aware of. Angry people are often not ready or even able to think logically or in an organized way. If you try to solve a customer's problem when he or she isn't ready, it won't work.

First, deal with the customer's feelings using various acknowledgment and empathy techniques. Only when the customer is acting less upset should you move on (refocus) to solve the specific problem.

Here's a tip: you'll know you're problem-solving too early if the customer ignores your attempts and you have to repeat yourself because he or she isn't hearing you.

Verbal Softeners

People don't respond well to language that sounds absolute, authoritarian, or harsh. For example, "We never make those kinds of mistakes" is very categorical and likely to antagonize even mild-mannered customers. Here's another way to put it: "It's

unlikely we've made a mistake." The word "unlikely" is a verbal softener. Other softeners include "perhaps," "sometimes," "it's possible," and "occasionally."

Here's another example for a situation where the employee believes the customer has made a mistake. You could say, "Clearly, you've made a mistake." That would be bad. You could soften the sentence by saying, "Perhaps you've misinterpreted something here." "Perhaps" is the softener, but notice we've also replaced the word "mistake" with "misinterpreted," a less harsh word.

Verbal softeners are valuable tools in helping you appear more cooperative and likable to customers and to prevent conflict.

Voice Tone—Emphatic

You can use an emphatic voice tone to convey that you're strongly committed to helping the customer. For example, let's say a customer has been telling you that he's late for an appointment and is double-parked and needs to be served quickly. You can respond in a laid-back way, but it's better to respond more emphatically—"I understand, I *will* get this done for you!" Note the emphasis on "will." Emphatic voice tones work best when they match the tone and energy that the customer is using.

When Question

The "When Question" is a cousin of "Neutral Mode." Its function is to force the customer to think, thereby interrupting the flow of angry or aggressive speech aimed at you. It works on the same principle. The "when" question is an unusual or novel question, and it's closed-ended so it tends to elicit short answers. You want short answers. It has a specific form that goes like this:

"When did you start thinking that [summarize in a neutral way a key point from what the customer said]?"

When this works properly, the customer will respond with a specific time or incident and then stop. That gives you the opening you need so you can use other techniques.

Let's say the customer accuses you of not caring. He says: "If you gave a damn about me, you'd take care of me properly."

The employee replies, "When did you start feeling you weren't getting the service you wanted?"

The customer answers, "The first time I came in here," and then stops talking.

The employee uses that opening to empathize and refocus the customer back to the issue and to more constructive behavior.

It's very important, once again, to not repeat any hot or emotional words the customer uses. For example, it wouldn't work if the employee said, "When did you start thinking I didn't give a damn about you?"

You're Right!

The "You're Right!" technique is cousin to "Neutral Mode," the "When Question," and "Find Agreement Points." It serves to surprise an angry customer, since the last thing he or she expects in the middle of a rant is for you to say, "You're right!" You'll find that emphatic use of this phrase will result in the customer not knowing what to say next. That provides an opening for you to use other techniques.

The "You're Right!" method is more emphatic than "Find Agreement Points."

Part Two

Dealing with Specific Customer Situations