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**What is Customer Service?**

Customer service is the practice of providing customers with a positive, helpful experience when they enter a business, throughout the time they stay at the business, and even after the customer leaves, should they have additional questions or products to return. Many stores and other businesses spend a great deal of time training their employees to provide great customer service, because it makes a customer more likely to become a returning, loyal client. There are a number of different ways that employees can provide great service to a customer, and most do not take much extra effort at all.

In a store, for example, all of the employees should be focused on providing excellent customer service to everyone who comes in. This begins with greeting a customer when they enter the store, and asking the customer if he or she needs help with anything. In addition, the employees should remain available while the customer is shopping, in order to answer questions or offer assistance. Many stores also have a designated counter for customer service, where customers may stop in order to return products, place special orders, or ask questions.

**Customer Loyalty and Customer Service?**

Building [customer loyalty](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-customer-loyalty.htm) is a complex process, and there are many different theories about how [customer service](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-customer-service.htm) and customer loyalty are related. Generally, it is assumed that [good customer service](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-constitutes-good-customer-service.htm) translates directly into customer loyalty, but this is not the entire story. Particular types of customer service do not instil in customers a sense of loyalty, even if employees are perfectly polite and professional. It takes even more unique strategies to connect customer service and customer loyalty, and attention to the needs of a [customer base](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-customer-base.htm) is the only way to identify which strategy will be successful.

In most cases, customer loyalty is not built solely on customer service. The customer base must have a genuine interest in the product or service offered and must also have a reason to patronize the business even if that reason is purely social or related to prestige. That said, customer service and customer loyalty are related in that customers are more likely to be loyal to an experience than simply a product. Service provided by employees is one of the best ways to create an experience.

Some businesses pride themselves on their professional customer service, but professionalism is not the key to [building customer loyalty](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-are-the-best-tips-for-building-customer-loyalty.htm). Customers must feel that they are special to the company on an individual level, which is an experience that can only be generated with a certain kind of customer service. Warm, personal customer service that reads the needs of the customers effectively is typically the best way to build customer loyalty, although there are some exceptions to this rule. More broadly, making sure that the needs of the customers are met on an individual level is the best way to achieve loyalty.

Although customer service and customer loyalty are not always related in the same way, it is certainly true that where customer service is lacking, customer loyalty will be lost. [Bad customer service](http://www.wisegeek.com/how-do-i-deal-with-bad-customer-service.htm) is a detriment to business in many ways and can destroy customer loyalty. It is difficult to police all employees to the degree that no customer ever has a bad experience, but it is possible to create the conditions in which employees feel they have an interest in providing effective customer service.

One interesting connection between these two concepts is that companies that treat employees in such a way that they provide good customer service often get customer loyalty as a benefit. In this situation, loyalty is a result of the general appearance of the company, not a direct response to a [customer experience](http://www.wisegeek.com/how-do-i-provide-the-best-customer-experience.htm). Creating a good company solves both customer service and customer loyalty problems.

**How Do I Provide Excellent Customer Service?**

The ability to provide excellent [customer service](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-customer-service.htm) is essential to the growth of any type of business. Without a team of support personnel who understand how to interact positively with clients, the potential to build a [customer base](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-customer-base.htm) and maintain [customer loyalty](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-customer-loyalty.htm) is greatly diminished. While there are many different programs and strategies to help businesses create an excellent customer service environment, there are a few essentials that are included in just about every approach.

One of the most important keys to providing excellent customer service is to listen to what customers have to say. All too often, customer care personnel are too busy thinking of how they will respond and not focusing on what the client is attempting to convey. By really listening, it is possible to not only hear the words spoken, but also to get a better understanding of the intent behind those words. Often, valuable clues about how to proceed are uncovered by listening first, then thinking in terms of what to say.

Another important basic is to always allow the client to have the floor first. This is especially true when dealing with [customer complaints](http://www.wisegeek.com/how-do-i-handle-customer-complaints.htm). Stepping back and allowing the customer to vent before attempting to address the issue often creates a situation in which the client feels as if someone really does understand his or her frustration. If some type of response is appropriate, the customer care professional should maintain a steady, calm tone that conveys the idea that there is nothing else in the world right now that is as important as matter on the client’s mind. Depending on the degree of agitation of the client, it may also be appropriate to ask a clarifying question or two; this will also help convey the message that someone does really care and wants to help.

One of the worst mistakes that any [customer support](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-customer-support.htm) professional can make is to assign blame for something that has gone wrong while talking with a client. It doesn’t matter if the shipping department made an error, or an order was damaged in transit, or if a salesperson failed to include something the customer wanted. Instead of participating in pointing fingers at the source, truly excellent customer service calls for acknowledging that the customer is unhappy, assuming ownership of that discomfort, and taking steps to make the customer happy again. If specific internal issues were the root cause of that unhappiness, those can be addressed with the right people after the client is satisfied and the matter has been resolved.

In general, excellent customer service calls for a [customer advocate](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-customer-advocate.htm) who is dedicated to doing everything possible to keep the client happy and loyal. This includes enhancing customer perceptions of the overall level of support, responding quickly and effectively to customer complaints, and realizing that the [voice of the customer](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-the-voice-of-the-customer.htm) is one of the most powerful tools for growth that any company can possess. While not always easy, delivering this level of customer support makes it possible to overcome a broad range of issues and maintain a relationship that serves everyone well for many years.

**What Is an Internal Customer?**

An internal customer is simply an employee who purchased a finished good or service directly from the employer, sometimes at a price that is discounted from the pricing that is charged to other types of consumers

Retail organizations often provide employees with opportunities to purchase goods at discounted prices, a move that prompts those employees to meet their needs by making purchases with the employer rather than buying from a competitor.

One of the challenges for any business is to find ways to include internal customer care in the overall client strategy. Since the focus of many [customer service](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-customer-service.htm) and support operations is directed outward, the needs and concerns of a customer who is part of the organization can be overlooked. This can be counter-productive on a number of levels, sometimes to the point of losing business and having an adverse effect on how the employee perceives his or her contribution to the success of the company. Choosing to include components that provide incentives to each internal customer as well as afford them the opportunity to receive assistance when and as needed will often not only increase the desire to buy from within, but will also have the benefit of motivating those employees to be as productive on the job as possible.