



A Customer Service Action Plan

Prepare when and how to address service problems

By CHRIS TOOKER

How Can I Help You?

Customer service as the final, most important pillar of Personal Branding

There's a saying: "People don't plan to fail, they just fail to plan." That axiom is especially true when it comes to customer service. When you're dealing with the prospect of unhappy customers—in other words, when you're dealing with any business—you need to have an organized plan on how to respond to service crises to keep customers from going elsewhere. It's not enough to just "fly by the seat of your pants".

Setting your standards for customer service is much easier when you do it *before* there's a problem, when you're relaxed and focused, instead of staring down the "barrel of the gun" at an upset, angry customer. So I suggest you produce a **Customer Service Action Plan** that sets companywide standards for all interaction with customers.

Writing Your Plan

The plan should be short (maybe 1-2 pages), something that can be posed in offices, your kitchen, cubicles, everywhere. Its purpose is to remind and refresh employees' memories so they can respond well to a normal customer service situation or a problem before it turns into a crisis. There are several key elements in setting up good procedures and a well-written policy, but always keep this in mind: *the question is not if you will respond, but how you will respond.*

Key Points in Creating Your Plan

Keep it simple – this ensures that it's easily understood and the desired outcomes are clear.

Focus on your company's values – remind your people again and again of the central values that should be part of each customer interaction. These support your brand.

Provide clear goals – let your employees know what your goals are with your customer service procedures: to strengthen your brand, to let customers know you appreciate their business, to create an atmosphere that suggests to the customer that you are doing everything to make their experience positive. Ultimately, to get repeat and referral business!

Forecast potential problems – Suggest to employees some of the service problems they are likely to run into, so they are not surprised.

Instruct – provide short, step-by-step instructions for dealing with unhappy customers. These should include key phrases to say, forms to fill out, service policies, whatever it takes to turn the situation around.

Also, engage in brainstorming sessions with your people as you're writing your plan. Include customers if you can and if appropriate. The idea is to find out where your shortcomings are or might be, and to develop a manual of procedures to address those problems. Consider scenarios, be honest about your past weaknesses, and develop systems to overcome them. It really works.

Fear, Pride and Ego

Finally, when you're developing your customer service policies, never forget the triplets of *fear, pride and ego*. People always worry that a service failure can mean a pink slip. As a result, they become defensive about their actions, even when they clearly provided poor service. This is often the greatest obstacle in correcting poor service. Always remember to make sure your employees know the reality: if they had thought what they did was wrong, they would have handled it in a different way. Redirect their thoughts in a positive way and you'll get a much better response.

Above all, make sure your people know that mistakes happen. The key isn't making the mistake, but how you react after you make it. If you own up to it, laugh, and go to the mat to make things right – even if it's the customer's fault, you can recover with some grace.

You need to have an organized plan on how to respond to service crises to keep customers from going elsewhere.

Chris Tooker is President and CEO of Chris Tooker Training, a company specializing in improving customer relations for growing companies. He can be reached by e-mail at ctooker@christooker.com or (949) 305-9998.