"No one takes ownership of the problem!"

"Don't outsource (CSRs) outside the U.S."

"Stop reading from a script, and listen to what I am saying!"

"Phone etiquette trainings would be very helpful."

"Pay your staff better, attract better talent."

2016 Professionalism Matters Customer Service Report
"What the Customer Really Wants!"

Introduction

With so many technological and other advances of the past decade, why does it seem like customer service is getting worse and worse? For me making a customer service call to try to get my cable repaired, contacting an insurance company to question a bill, or even calling a retailer to make changes to an order too often creates an unparalleled sense of dread!!! Why? Because that grueling, draining customer service call has become the norm that I brace myself for each and every time. I can't tell you how many times I've hung up the phone exasperated after yet another disastrous customer service experience vowing never to do business with that company again!

As a corporate trainer (and former business strategy consultant), I think that the desire for continuous improvement is deeply embedded in my DNA somehow. Invariably, after a ridiculously frustrating (sometimes even offensive) exchange with a customer service representative (CSR), I'm instinctively focused on analyzing what went wrong and figuring out how to work my way through their corporate labyrinth to provide what I deem to be priceless (albeit unsolicited) customer feedback. After years of requests from clients for customer service training, I finally bit the bullet and decided to develop my own training program. My goal with the training is to question many blindly presumed traditional customer service "best practices" and instead develop fresh recommendations that reflect what today's customers really want! To support this effort, I conducted my own completely non scientific, non industry funded research - a simple survey focused on getting real customers to open up about what they hate about customer service calls, what they like about the companies who do it well, and what companies need to do to win them over! The responses I received were quite eye opening and chock full of great information that companies need to know!!! With over 82% of respondents indicating that a bad customer service experience would cause them to be moderately, very, or completely likely to not do business with a company again, all companies should make it a top priority to understand – WHAT THE CUSTOMER REALLY WANTS!

More About the Survey Respondents

The survey includes responses from 160 respondents collected over an approximate one month timeframe (August 2016). Below you will find some basic demographic data on respondents:

77.5% Female
Response count 124

22.5% Male
Response count 36

What is your age?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
18-20	1.3%	2
21-29	5.0%	8
30-39	18.1%	29
40-49	43.1%	69
50-59	23.8%	38
60 or older	8.8%	14
17 or younger	0.0%	0

What Surprised Me About the Results….

- In today's era of chat, IM, social media, texting and virtual/online help, I was shocked to see that most respondents (a whopping 49%) preferred phone as their communication method for addressing customer service issues. Text/IM came in a DISTANT second at only 19%.

- The survey asked respondents to share their list of "best" and "worst" customer service companies. Although there were some expected responses for the "worst customer service" list (e.g. cable companies, insurance providers, etc.), it was surprising to see some of the same company names showing up on both the "worst" and "best" lists.

- I was also surprised to see a lack of consistency in the "best" list. Instead of seeing a predictable handful of companies with great customer service reputations, the responses were quite varied. However, there was much more consistency in the "worst" list – several companies reappeared over and over without fail.

- The banking industry seemed to be viewed more positively by some as it was perceived as mostly NOT moving to non native English speaking CSRs.

- A whopping 71% of respondents rated the level of customer service they typically receive as "Very Poor", "Poor" or "Fair". Only 29% rated it as "Good" or "Very Good"…yikes!

- 61% of respondents indicated that they feel customer service levels have declined over the past five years. Although my personal feeling was that I'd experienced paltry customer service in recent years, it was still pretty surprising to see so many agree that things are going downhill…..

49% of respondents preferred phone to other communication modes for addressing customer service issues.

71% of respondents rated the level of customer service they receive (by phone) as "very poor", "poor", or "fair."

60% of respondents indicated that they feel customer service levels have declined over the past five years.

82% of respondents indicated they have difficulty understanding representatives due to dialect.

Biggest Customer Frustration Areas/Key Customer Service Mistakes

Trying to find out how to reach customer service should NOT feel like an episode of CSI.
It doesn't make you seem cool and sophisticated to move all customer service communications to social media, nor are we entertained by excessive wait times on hold (because you're experiencing "higher than normal call volume") or having to wade through a difficult website to find the heavily guarded contact number that the company clearly wants no one to have. We are the customer – the reason why the company is in business – we don't like feeling like a jilted girlfriend.

We are infuriated by customer service representatives who are robotic and are clearly reading from a script. Customers take time to make a phone call to receive a higher level of attention to their issue. If representatives aren't knowledgeable about the company's products/services, policies, etc., it feels like a complete waste of time to deal with someone who clearly doesn't know how to address the problem and is simply reading from a script.

We are so frustrated and disappointed with customer service reps who don't actually listen and project very little empathy. This concern was repeated often throughout the survey feedback. Indeed, customers can sense whether the person talking to them about their problem actually cares and that makes a difference. When asked how often they felt CSRs truly heard/understood their concern/issue during customer service calls, only 35% responded "Often" or "Always".

Customers HATE IVRs, phone trees, and phone automation systems.
To make matters worse, don't insult us and waste our time by asking us to input account information (sometimes multiple times) only to have to repeat it again once the agent takes the call. It just makes the "automated" system seem useless in addition to being frustrating.

Non native speaking CSRs can make the experience extremely frustrating.
Companies also need to know that asking foreign representatives to use an English name and providing some accent reduction training is not enough. Customers don't want to have to "work" to understand the representative that takes their call.

Customer service representatives who don't take ownership of the problem are a key frustration.
Possibly nothing irritates the customer more than talking to a representative who blames other departments, blames the customer, or worse yet forwards the customer around mindlessly to "someone who can help". PLEASE we want to talk to one person who can fix it! 57% of respondents indicated that their issue is typically resolved only "rarely" or "sometimes" during the customer service call.

Don't try to upsell me during my customer service call.
If customers are calling because there's an existing problem, they're probably not in the best mood and certainly not interested in hearing a sales pitch at that moment!

Not being valued as a current customer is completely infuriating.
It feels like a slap in the face when companies clearly put all their marketing/promotions energy into getting NEW customers and seem to leave the existing customers hanging out to dry. It almost seems to encourage existing customers to become previous customers to get the premium deals, attention, and new customer perks.

We hate to wait on the phone.
Phone time is like dog years. 3-4 minutes waiting on the phone feels like 10-15 minutes waiting in person!

Key Takeaways and Overall Recommendations...

Customer Service Representatives Absolutely Make the Difference

The fact that some companies showed up on both the "best" and "worst" list suggests that customers can have a completely different experience/impression of a company based solely on the particular CSR they encounter. I've certainly had a difficult call with a CSR and instead of continuing the call just opted to end the conversation and call right back in the hopes of getting a better representative on the phone who might be more informed, more knowledgeable or just more professional and willing to help! Companies should not just make changes in how they recruit, train, and reward CSR staff but also shift the corporate culture to acknowledge the importance of the CSR role.

> CSR bedside manner makes all the difference.

Elevate the Role of Customer Service Representatives

If you owned a high end jewelry store on Rodeo Drive, would you get the cheapest safe you could find to house your most precious jewels? Of course not! The reality is that CSRs are often the only staff within a company to regularly interact directly with the customer - hear their concerns/ feedback, represent the company, project a positive or negative image of the company, etc. That puts them in a tremendous position of power and influence over customer satisfaction and loyalty. They are in essence protecting the company's most precious jewels on a daily basis. Unfortunately, CSRs are also typically among the lowest paid staff with a 2015 median annual salary (according to Bureau of Labor Statistics) of just $31,720, The extremely low pay most likely negatively impacts morale, turnover, candidate quality and other factors that can have a dramatic downstream impact on customer service levels. The low salary level may also encourage companies to automatically recruit younger or less educated individuals more heavily without a thorough vetting process to determine if they are the best fit for positions focused around heavy phone communication and managing difficult conversations. Indeed, learning to deescalate a situation, reduce a customer's anxiety, and create true customer connection within the first couple minutes of a phone conversation (without the benefit of face to face contact) is a unique skills, and the best companies will aggressively recruit candidates who have that skill set and reward them accordingly.

> CSRs are typically among the lowest paid staff within a company.

Ditch the CSR Scripts and Mind Numbing Interactive Voice Response (IVR) Systems

Something that came across loud and clear through the survey is that customers want a CSR to genuinely listen to them, show empathy, critically think about their individual problem, and work to resolve their specific situation. Having extensive "If they say this, you say that" scripts are the perfect recipe for encouraging just the opposite. Even the most well intentioned CSR is likely discouraged from actual unique, personalized connection with the customer when a word for word script is stuffed in their face and they're told to follow it....or else! Likewise, IVRs seem to be specifically designed to infuriate customers (who are likely already not in the best mood since they're having to call customer service in the first place). I'm sure IVR systems provide certain efficiencies, but the "customer goodwill cost" may certainly outweigh the practical "operational benefit". Even if it's not practical to ditch IVRs completely (particularly for large call centers), companies should seriously consider streamlining them to require a response to no more than one automated question.

> A sincere "I'm so sorry" goes a long way to relieve customer tension.

> " "When I say I am not interested, it would be nice for them to get that the first time." "

Train CSRs to Create "Customer Connection" Within the First 2 Minutes of the Call

Many respondents commented on the "lack of empathy" they felt from CSRs during customer service interactions. When customers call in with a problem or issue, they're likely stressed, worried, and anxious if not downright infuriated. Possibly the most important role/responsibility of the CSR (before actually focusing on a specific solution) is to try to create an authentic connection with the customer. This means relating to their feelings and empathizing with their situation. Taking just a minute or two to meet the customer where they are emotionally is absolutely a HUGE element of creating a positive customer connection which provides a basis for a productive interaction and may likely build a sense of goodwill towards the company as well. What could this sound like?

- "I'm so sorry you're experiencing this. "

- "I can definitely understand your frustration."

- "I can certainly understand your anxiety about this since your daughter's birthday is this weekend. I'm going to do everything within my power to expedite the shipment so that it makes it in time for the party."

Don't tell them what to say specifically, but make sure CSR staff are trained to try to create that critical customer connection in the first two minutes of the conversation. Nothing is more frustrating for a customer than being on the verge of tears about the situation and having the robotic CSR blurt out…"Your account number please?"

It's also critically important for CSRs to apologize on behalf of the company IMMEDIATELY if the company dropped the ball in any way. There's nothing wrong with simply expressing regret that the customer is experiencing anguish even if they haven't determined yet if the company was at fault. Remember, treat the customer as you would a dear friend. If they're hurting, you'd probably express some sort of sympathy whether the pain area was your doing or not. The other benefit of apologizing or showing empathy immediately is that testy customers will almost always calm down quite a bit when greeted with a simple *"I'm so sorry you're going through this. Let me see what I can do to help."*

Rename "Customer Service Representative (CSR)" "Customer Solution Owner (CSO)"

More important than the name change is a shift in the role itself and the overall corporate culture. True customer service is not blindly reading a predefined script or shuttling customers to different departments to minimize call times. Instead, real customer service is achieved when customers can call and reach someone who immediately becomes their advocate to solve their problem. In order to do this, phone reps must be encouraged (if not required) to problem solve and also be empowered to identify creative solutions and offer on the spot minor credits, discounts, or other rewards. Call centers are often ruled by strict metrics. Those metrics drive behavior. Instead of measuring average call time (to encourage shorter calls), why not reward reps for the most creative solution to a customer's problem? Another key element of the CSO model is enabling the representative to act as a single point of contact for the customer. To achieve this customers should be provided the CSO's first name, unique identification number, and direct call back number for all calls – then the CSO would be expected to coordinate with other departments as needed to help resolve the customer's issue. When customers feel they have an advocate who is owning their problem, it will likely engender not only profound appreciation for the corporate practice but a deeper affection and sense of loyalty for that company long term.

> **Make the "customer connection" in the first two minutes!**

> **"I absolutely hate the automated voice that tries to understand my problem then triage my call. It drives me nuts!"**

Sample Respondent Comments*

In your experience what do the companies who provide the best customer service do to make them "the best"?

- LISTEN to the customer.
- In-country/same-country representatives, never saying the words "I have never heard of that problem before" or "I can't help you at this number, let me transfer you."
- They restate the problem to ensure they understand it.
- (1) Respect, (2) latitude to use their problem solving skills, not just reading a script, (3) seeking to understand need and reach the best solution quickly.
- Customer Service Reps know their product and are empowered to solve customer problems during the first call.
- On a call I made to cancel service, the representative treated me with such appreciation I almost thought of staying.
- They were more knowledgeable, seemed more willing to help, and used good manners. And "I'm sorry" goes a long way, as does a thank you.
- Listen carefully, speak clear English, and resolve my problem to my satisfaction. Plus call me by name.
- Listened, apologized....satisfied.
- Always grant me with discounts or bucks when I'm inconvenienced beyond my control.
- They took the time to listen and understand the problem, and took initiative to fix it. I didn't have to ask for the call to be escalated, and I didn't have to wait for them to get approval to fix my issues. The rep I talked to was empowered to fix things.
- Technically I was willing to pay the standard rate for the room, but the service rep looked for and found a way to extend a special rate that had been available. She did this even though I had already verbally approved the higher rate. The extra effort on her part made me think highly of her and Hilton in general.
- Personal attention, listen, acknowledge mistakes, apologize, try to make it better, discounts, gifts.

In your experience what do the companies who provide the worst customer service do to make them "the worst"?

- Only read from a script. No emotion in the phone call.
- They use a script. That appears to be all they are trained to do so they cannot actually respond to your issue, they can only go back to a sheet of paper they seem to have in front of them.
- Company X - even if you get a name, you cannot reach them back, so you are required to explain your situation on each follow up. The system is set up for you to give up. Company Y just doesn't care.
- Their goal seems to be to make money not help.
- Not effective at resolving issues, the reps seemed unprofessional, apathetic, and rude.
- They are robots and seem uncaring.
- They always try to sell you something else. Even if they don't resolve the reason you called in the first place.
- Disinterested representatives who lacked knowledge of policies and lacked a desire to do more than just get off of the phone.
- No solution or empathy and rush you off the phone.

> ❝ "Just because you have a decent product, doesn't mean customers will stay with you if your service is suckie." ❞

Please share any additional customer service frustrations you've experienced or recommendations you would make to companies to improve their customer service?

- Hire consultants if need be to help get yourselves out of the dark ages.

- When I say I am not interested, it would be nice for them to get that the first time.

- Had better responses when complained on Twitter.

- Empower employees!

- Listen to the customer, be empathetic, and help solve the problem.

- When you speak to a supervisor, you should be given a contact number to get back to them, not told there is no way to transfer you to that office.

- Don't waste the customer's time.

- Answer the question that I asked & assist me with excellent customer service, I pay my bill every month without attitudes.

- Not every situation is the same!!! I realize you run a business and most likely you are the ONLY provider we have no choice but we are still paying customers !!! If we had a choice it would NOT be you!!!

- Many companies have very complicated phone tree set-ups and it's clear that they really don't want you to speak with a person. In addition, credit card companies make you put in account information and it's clear that it's just designed to make you think that you're making progress in the cue but really it's just an illusion because you have to repeat all that information when the customer service rep becomes available. Another big pet peeve I have is when there's a long wait time--anything over 5 minutes is unacceptable in my book.

- Technology has increased easy data access but people skills don't seem to improve.

- Mostly this is more frustrating because of automated systems. There should be an option to speak to a person that comes up quickly, rather than at the end of a seemingly endless list of automated options.

- No one takes ownership of the problem.

- They are trained to read from a script. I can research a generic answer on my own. I call to talk to an expert.

- They seem to have a step by step script and if your issue doesn't fit the mold, they don't know what to do or, in an effort to help, they ask questions from the script that have nothing to do with your issue.

- I think they often want to solve the problem quickly without the determining root cause of the issue.

- I often feel like they are reading a script and will not deviate from it. They don't seem genuine.

About the Author

In 2003 Dana Brownlee founded Professionalism Matters a corporate training company based in Atlanta. She is an energetic and innovative corporate trainer, keynote speaker, and work-life balance advocate. She has been interviewed by (or published in) CNN, The Wall Street Journal, Atlanta Journal Constitution, Redbook, Working Mother, Forbes.com, Money magazine, Entrepreneur.com, and other notable publications. A nationally recognized speaker, Dana speaks to groups large and small on a variety of topics including the ugly truth of customer service, how to build a strong team, time management tips, and how to enhance your team's professionalism and productivity. As a follow up to the 2016 Professionalism Matters What Customers Really Want Survey, Dana has developed the following presentations/workshops:

- The Ugly Truth of Customer Service: Learnings from the 2016 Professionalism Matters What Customers Really Want Survey

- Are You Really Just Faking Customer Service?

- CSRs The Secret Weapon of Customer Loyalty

- 5 Customer Service Mistakes Too Many Companies Are Making