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In an intense workplace where everyone is "faking it 'til they make it," there's pressure to always have the right answer to any given question. I get it. I too love being right and having the most helpful advice for people. Maybe it's a carryover from school? Maybe it's a firstborn thing? Maybe it's simply being a hardcore people pleaser at heart? Whatever my reason and whatever yours, our quest to correctly answer every question can actually hold us back at work. You really don't know everything. It's hard to hear. I know, and I'm sorry, but it's true. You have to say, "I don't know" regularly, and here's why. Responding to questions under pressure or out of habit typically doesn't result in the most well thought-out answers. In the worst-case scenarios, a confidently-delivered wrong answer is dangerous and expensive. Most of the time, though, it's just a colossal waste of time. I love not wasting time even more than I love having the right answer. Most other people feel the same. By always having an answer, you inadvertently undermine your credibility. This is because everyone else knows you don't know everything, and you start to look silly by always giving a confident answer, even when it's obviously wrong. Your team would much rather you admit to not knowing something than fake it just for the sake of looking competent." But what if I actually do always know the answer to all the questions I'm asked at work?", you ask. If you really feel that you have the answer for every issue that comes up at work, then I'd argue you've stayed too long in your current role. If you've literally mastered every angle of the job, it's time to go. You're no longer challenging yourself. Move vertically to gain greater perspective and visibility, or move laterally to a different industry to up the challenge that way. Either strategy works to break out of stagnation. Instead of always providing an answer, I propose a simple strategy: Say "I don't know" when you don't know. Then, follow that statement with, "... and I'm going to find out" or "...I'll get back to you" or "...what do you think?" Now, this isn't an excuse not to prepare like crazy for questions you anticipate getting during your next big presentation. I recently saw an episode of Shark Tank where the contestant was turned down by Mark Cuban. During the question and answer portion after her pitch, she left no room for reflection or opening to take Cuban's advice. She came off as arrogant because she had an answer for everything. He clearly wasn't interested in working with someone like her—and, based on what I saw, I wouldn't be either. The alternative is to think about your knowledge and ability to answer questions in three tiers: basic, stretch, and growth. You absolutely should have the basic, foundational knowledge needed to fulfill the role you're paid to play. You should stretch yourself and seek answers to all the questions up and around the edges of your expertise, the questions that you're able to anticipate but don't yet know the answer to. And, you should intentionally put yourself in situations that will challenge your thinking by exposing you to questions you couldn't possibly expect. These are the most fascinating, growth-sparking questions you'll get. They're the most memorable. They stick with you and have the potential to change the course of your most important work. Seeking out the questions that will push you at work will not only make you grow as a person, it will also show your team that you're humble and willing to learn, two underrated but excellent qualities in a leader. Remember that saying "I don't know" every once in a while doesn't make you look incompetent—it will actually increase your team's trust that you're always giving the truest answer you can. If you liked this column, subscribe to email alerts in the Work Life Lab and you'll never miss a post. Good customer service is like art. It's hard to explain what it is, but you know it when you see it. For most people, it's easy to distinguish between good and poor service. Defining the difference, however, is another story. That's because "good" customer service is subjective. It depends on how the customer is feeling in the moment and what they're asking your business to do. This means that even great service can be overlooked if the customer's needs aren't sufficiently met. So, how do you know if your company is providing good customer service? No matter what industry you're in, there are key elements that are shared in every great service interaction. In this post, we'll list a few of the most important ones you'll need to demonstrate if you want to provide excellent customer service at your business. 1. Put customer needs first. A customer first strategy means your team is committed to finding solutions even when they're difficult to attain or require some out-of-the-box thinking to implement. When a clear solution isn't available, your team goes above and beyond to create workarounds that help customers achieve goals. And, if there's absolutely no way to solve the customer's problem, your team relays the feedback to management so your company can work towards a long-term solution. This seems like a lot of work for one customer issue, right? Well, it's this type of commitment that yields excellent service interactions. When customers feel you're as invested in their goals as they are, it becomes easier to work together and troubleshoot issues. 2. Clarify the customer's goals and roadblocks. Before you begin working on a case, it's important to clarify the customer's goals and roadblocks. This not only makes the purpose of the interaction clear but it also demonstrates a collaborative understanding of the customer's issue. After all, you can't solve the problem if you don't know what the customer is trying to do and what's preventing them from achieving their goal. 3. Prioritize quality over quantity. During holidays or product launches, you may experience a customer service surge where the volume of your support cases rises significantly. At these times, it can be tempting to focus on solving as many cases as possible instead of thoroughly working through each issue. Rather than prioritizing speed and efficiency, reps should center their attention on customer delight. It's their job to create positive interactions; it's management's job to find solutions that improve productivity, whether that means adopting customer service technology or rethinking internal support strategies. 4. Engage customers with genuine interest and enthusiasm. A delightful customer experience typically starts with an enthusiastic greeting. Reps should try to outwardly show their interest in the customer's problem and express an optimistic attitude towards finding a solution. If you're a more introverted customer service rep, don't feel pressured to act as bubbly as your extroverted colleagues. This can even backfire in some cases as it's hard to focus on keeping up an act while simultaneously working with a customer. Instead, just pay attention to your tone and body language. Look the customer in the eye and smile often — even if you're on the phone, smiling will help portray a positive demeanor. 5. Create accessible, omnichannel support options. With smartphones putting the internet into the palm of our hands, customers expect an immediate response whenever they need you to answer a question. Whether this means providing support through a variety of communication mediums or having extensive self-service options, your business should make it easy to access your customer service team. But, that's not all. Your support channels need to be connected, so customers can freely transition between mediums without having to restart the service process. This type of omnichannel experience removes friction from the interaction and makes it easier to provide effective customer support. 6. Troubleshoot collaboratively. It's the primary responsibility of the customer service rep to provide an effective solution to the customer's problem. That's step one. Step two is positioning the response so the customer feels like you came to the conclusion collaboratively. This creates a more delightful experience than if you were to just copy and paste a prewritten solution. For example, let's say a customer came to you with a routine problem that you know your knowledge base already has a solution for. Instead of immediately giving the customer the page URL, walk them through each step of the document first. If the customer gets stuck, provide the knowledge base article as a handy, additional reference. If they follow along successfully, send them the link as a follow-up guide in case the same issue happens again. Not only does this approach make customers feel like they found their own solutions, it teaches them how to find answers to their questions independently and reduces case volume for your team. 7. Ask for feedback and learn from customers. Not every customer interaction is going to be sunshine and rainbows. Some are going to be filled with friction as customers openly provide feedback about your brand. In these scenarios, it's important to maintain a professional demeanor and treat the situation as a learning opportunity. Rather than taking the criticism personally, look at it as feedback that you can use to improve your customer service offer and your company as a whole. Start with relaying feedback to management. If the case needs to be escalated, follow procedures for escalation management. If the problem isn't serious enough for that, record the issue and forward the information to whichever team or department would benefit most. As you continue this process, you'll start to see feedback trends forming that can help you make positive adjustments to your support strategy. 8. Solve for long-term solutions, rather than short-term conveniences. The best way to prove you're on the customer's side is to advocate for long-term solutions over short-term conveniences. This shows the customer that you're not only interested in solving the problem in front of you, but you're also concerned with their overall success. Some cases might call for you to opt for a short-term solution as it's the best option available at the moment. However, it's important to ensure that short-term solutions don't become long-term ones as your reps continue to work on other cases. When a long-term solution does become available, your team should circle back to these cases and notify customers about the update. For example, say a customer needed your product to be compatible with iOS systems. When the customer first opened the case, your product couldn't do that, but now, it's a beta feature that users can request. Rather than hoping they'll see promotions for this feature, the rep who managed the case should reopen the support ticket and notify the customer. This level of personalized support shows a genuine commitment to customer success. For more ways to improve support experiences, master these customer service skills.







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