

## **The Missing Link: How People Can Know Everything About Customer Service and Still Not Be Able to Do It**

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I had a strange experience at an airline counter recently. My international flight was cancelled, and when I went to the counter to find out what to do next, I watched three customer service agents discuss the flight they were going to put me on much later that day.

They went about printing tickets, writing me meal vouchers, looking at the computer...all without any of them speaking directly to me or even telling me what they were doing! As I stood there feeling ignored, I realized the problem was that none of them wanted to be the one explaining the bad news. They all knew what to do, likely had been taught all the right customer service techniques, but when it came down to it, they were afraid to even talk to their customers!

Is it fair to expect people without extensive business experience to be able to satisfy difficult customers in high stress environments? After all, doing so requires exceptional "people" skills - the ability to listen, empathize, articulate respect for other points of view, target solutions, and influence others, all with confidence and professionalism.

Whether fair or not, the fact of the matter is your customers expect it. Your people's interpersonal skills make all the difference in how your customers perceive your organization, how likely they are to do business in the future, and how quickly and efficiently their needs are met.

The problem is that this is the toughest part of customer service and the hardest to train, which is why people in customer service who know their products and have been through customer service training can still fall short in actual practice.

The good news is that these are specific and coachable skills that can be improved. Anyone in an internal or external customer service position can benefit by improving their ability to:

- Begin a business conversation in a way that puts others at ease.
- Listen, not just to what others say, but how they say it - identifying their satisfaction or willingness level at any time.
- Prove respect for what others have to say, causing credibility and rapport. People "open up" to customer service people who are skillful at this ability.

- Analyze an opportunity or problem in depth, receiving meaningful and honest answers to specific fact-finding questions
- Quickly solve problems and resolve conflict.
- Take the lead in a conversation to articulate solutions and gain belief or buy-in.

These high level skills make everyone better at customer interactions. People are able to understand customer attitudes and problems more thoroughly, respond appropriately, dissolve negative attitudes, position and "sell" solutions and ideas, and gain successful outcomes.

The secret to success is practice. Interpersonal customer service skills can only be improved through interpersonal, face-to-face use and repetition. This is why The PAR Group's methodology for developing customer service skills focuses on real use of the skills and frequent coached practice in order to make sure your people actually become comfortable and fluent enough with the skills that they can apply them even in those "scary" real life situations.