

# Improving Customer Service In Public Schools And Public Education: 9 Expert Tips For K-12 And Beyond

Micah Solomon, Contributor Customer service

As a customer service consultant, I find that any initiative to improve customer service in the public schools and public education, whether K12 or beyond, can benefit from first clarifying how educators are and aren't "in customer service" (in a way that is equivalent to how that term is used in a commercial organization).

So *are* educators (and educational administrators) actually "in customer service"? Well, yes, but there are differences. Being in education is different from being a barista or waiter or contact center rep. You have a deep and broad involvement in the subject, you've come into this field because it's a calling, and your relationship with the "customer" is more complex.

But the most important difference is this: *You're not simply trying to "serve customers." You're trying to build your students into responsible scholars and citizens.* Which is notably different from what a commercial enterprise aims to do. In a commercial enterprise, you strive to remain entirely nonjudgmental, nonprodding of your customers.

In fact, in a commercial setting you *want* customers to surrender responsibility to your company, to have your company take on burdens that traditionally belonged to the customer. (For example: it's advantageous to a bank if the customer stops balancing her checkbook and instead becomes dependent on the "low balance alerts" function of a mobile banking app, because this makes the bank a more indispensable service provider to the customer.)

But building responsibility in students at times calls for a different, more tough-love, approach.

But only sometimes. Much of working in education is highly analogous to working with commercial customers. So I think the task here is to ensure that the truly customer-service (as opposed to educational and character-building) aspects of education are as good as they are in commercial enterprises (or at least as good as admittedly limited public resources are able to provide). Because inefficiency and rudeness and bureaucracy only get in the way of your real work of building scholars and citizens.

Here are nine suggestions for improving customer service in public schools. (I am here defining your "customer" as being the student, the student's family--to the extent that family supports the student's goals--and, to some extent, the community and taxpayers.)

1. **Streamline.** Customers today expect what I call "digital parity." They expect organizations in every arena to be as efficient, streamlined, and easy to use as the best of what those customers have experienced online. Schools and school systems don't get a pass on this. Today's customers expect self-service options, they don't expect to repeatedly fill out forms with information they've already provided elsewhere, and they actively rebel against org chart-mandated siloing ("I don't handle that, you'll have to go down the hall, or "you'll have to come back Thursdays, when Ms. \_\_\_\_ is in the office.")

2. **Try it yourself.** Are you easy to use? You won't know until you try. Try your own website without your auto-log in. Is it easy? Or a pain? Come in the front door of your building (rather than entering from the employee parking area) and see if the front door swings open easily, or whacks you on the shoulder. Fill out a "request information" form online and see if anyone—ever!—responds. You may be shocked at what you find out.
3. **Do the hustle.** Perfect customer service, delivered late, feels like a defect. And the timeline for what customers consider "late" is continually getting shorter. You're not being judged based on what's always been "fast enough for education"; you're being judged, implicitly and unconsciously, based on the speed of amazon, Uber, and Starbucks.
4. **Benchmark outside of education.** More and more, what your customers are expecting in customer service comes from great service they experience *outside* of education—and you, too, should look outside of education to great companies and organizations regardless of industry for inspiration that will improve your game at school. In timeliness as mentioned in point 3, and in quality, efficiency, and service style.
5. **Learn to apologize.** Things *will* go wrong. Prepare for this, emotionally as well as operationally. Note that sometimes—often—you're simply apologizing for the situation, not for something you did wrong. It doesn't matter; an apology is still of value.
6. **Don't make customers ask simple questions that they should have been able to find online.** Customers don't like to be burdened to contact you for items that could easily be provided for them on a self-service basis. Do your FAQ's actually include the questions that customers want the answers to? Or were they written six years ago by your web developer? Do they get an auto-confirmation when they submit a form, or do they need to call to ensure their query wasn't lost in the ether? And so on.
7. **Get the "hello before the hello" right.** Hellos and goodbyes are key moments in customer service, and what organizations often neglect to consider is what I call "the hello before the hello": If parking is hard to find, if disabled access is poor (or—just as common—confusing), if office hours are posted incorrectly online, then you're making a poor impression before your "customer" (here I'm mostly thinking of parents and prospective parents) even gets to your office.
8. **Don't lose it on the handoff** It's easy for an employee to promise something to a customer—and then send the customer elsewhere within your organization for actual results. Fair enough: but did the details of the customer's needs actually get fully conveyed to the person who was handed the ball? And, did the handoffee follow through on these instructions? Or did she hand off the responsibility again? (And, if so, was the customer support fumbled on *that* handoff?) Follow-through and follow-up are keys to a successful customer experience, and are often best accomplished by the person who first took the request. You may not be the person to do the technical work required to fulfill a customer need, but you can contribute by following through to ensure that technical work was done.
9. **Build a culture of yes.** A hallmark of a great organization is an attitude in every department, every corner, every hallway is as follows: "*The answer is yes—now what was your question?*" There's great power in getting everyone in your organization to share a goal of getting to a "yes" for every customer, rather than figuring out ways to say "no," "not my department," "it doesn't work that way around here," "sadly, we cannot accommodate that request," or "if you call back in the morning, perhaps we'll be able to help you." This should be self-evident, right? Yet, well-meaning employees can still find a dozen ways to say no to their customers. Which makes it incredibly important to set, and as often as necessary re-set, your cultural default to yes. You accomplish this by modeling a spirit of yes, hiring for a spirit of yes,

rewarding a spirit of yes. (And there's one more thing: Sometimes in education, achieving a culture of "yes" requires rooting out or/and reforming "situational tyrants." Any institution can become a breeding ground for what I call "situational tyrants," people who have the power to say "no" within their tiny little fiefdom, and who exercise that power every chance they get. It is incredibly important to get these people to come over to your program of having "yes" as the goal: "Yes, we can assist you with this and would be happy to do so.")

I think you'll recognize that #9 brings us full circle to what is different about customer service in education. Because unlike in a commercial enterprise, you can't, and shouldn't, always say yes to a student, or to that student's parents. If that "yes" takes away responsibility-building opportunities for the student (acquiescing to grade-fudging, indefinite extensions and the like), if that "yes" is unfair to other students or to the community at large (graduating unprepared students). But you'll know the difference. Because you're a professional educator.

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