



WE ALL SCREAM FOR... EXEMPLARY CUSTOMER SERVICE

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Forty years ago, I began my dedicated career in customer service. My mission was the successful dispensing of frozen dairy goods to a demanding, often unruly public.

More specifically, I scooped and served ice cream.

Back then, seamless customer service meant understanding our products, being able to accurately describe each, taking an order correctly, and delivering a high-quality, accurate cone or cup with a friendly smile, regardless of the number of impatient customers standing in line.

Since then, the only thing that has changed is the ice cream.

In the evolution of customer service, the right step might be a step backward in time. Even in our eyecare practices, the basic

principles of customer service remain the same as the corner ice cream shop. Understand your product and service, be able to articulate each one, and identify and meet the needs of the customer with good-natured professionalism.

Here are some guidelines for applied practice.

1. **First off, you can't sell what you don't know.** Understanding your products and services, and being able to accurately and succinctly articulate each, is and always will be of unsurpassed importance in successful customer service.

Everyone in the practice should know every product and service you offer. This doesn't necessarily mean that

each employee needs to know every fine-print detail about each and every product and service... but they absolutely need to know, at the least, the broad strokes and who, in the immediate vicinity, has the rest of this knowledge.

In an optical dispensary setting, each employee should have working knowledge of the specialized tests we perform, how long it takes and a general idea of what they are for. For example, your optician should know that an OCT takes 15 minutes and why we perform that test, while the technician should know we have task-specific eyewear for anyone who uses a computer. Everyone needs to know the ice cream flavors

even if they are not the expert at actually making the sundae.

2. Identify the customer's needs.

Listen, listen, listen. Patients often struggle with articulating their needs, conveying them incompletely and in a broad array of innuendo and mannerisms. Many patients have latent needs or needs they didn't even know they had.

What is this patient trying to order? What do they need from us today? Observation can be as valuable as listening. For example, a patient comes in carrying a beautiful quilted bag.

"Did you make that?" you ask.

"Oh yes," she replies. "I love to quilt."

Your response, "All that beautiful work requires sharp vision. Did you know we have eyeglasses that will help you with your quilting, so you don't have to try to find the perfect spot to see it with your bifocals?"

She might not have said she's having a hard time seeing her quilting or even mentioned that she has to hold her work "just so" to make her bifocals work perfectly... but we know that's a need. In our quest to document a chief complaint, sometimes we lose sight of needs we can observe and solve. An analogy: I know you asked for a strawberry sundae but the new strawberry-marshmallow sundae is amazing—let me explain why.

3. Third, deliver accurately. This means, in addition to correctly fulfilling an order, managing your customer's expectations.

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Deliver precise information about what the entire process, procedure, or product will look like from the patient's perspective. Try to speak "human" rather than "ophthalmologist." Remove as many technical terms as possible. The best products and services in the world will fail if over-promised or if the patient does not understand what is being presented. We don't want the patient to expect a hot fudge sundae when what they need and what we are delivering is chocolate ice cream.

When I'm standing in line for ice cream, my expectations are really self-managed. I see the line, I can roughly judge about how long it's going to take me to get to the front of that line. When I check in at your office, I might have an idea of wait time based on the number of cars in the parking lot or people in the waiting room, but I really don't know where I fall in the line.

We have to manage that expectation verbally. At check-in that might sound like this: "Mrs. Jones, welcome to our office. Dr. Smith is a few minutes behind schedule today, but you can expect your visit with us today to be about 90 minutes. Please feel free to visit our optical dispensary now. You will not lose your place in line; our technician will come

get you when they are ready to start your eye exam."

4. Finally, most importantly, deliver it all with an abundance of friendliness.

Smiles are heard over phone lines; genuine listening and customer engagement are easily felt. I believe it's nearly impossible to teach people to be friendly, but smiles and helpfulness are ingrained in any successful salesperson. The key isn't in teaching those skills so much as unlocking them.

Happy staff equates to happy patients. Customer service begins at home with our staff. Follow the same simple steps with your staff and they will deliver to your patients. Identify their needs, meet their needs, engage them by genuinely listening, respect their skills. A walk through the office with a big smile and hearty "Good morning" will trickle directly down to the patients as surely as will a gruff "Let's get this day over with." Set realistic expectations for staff, too. Don't promise your staff banana splits, then give them melted ice cream. *AE*



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