

Chapter 5

Customer Service



Chapter Overview

Customers are the lifeblood of your business so the happier they are, the better for you. Customer satisfaction is often linked to customer service, and customer service is a major factor in customer retention and whether you receive positive or negative word-of-mouth referrals. Customer retention is important to the bottom line: research shows that it costs three to five times more to replace than to keep a customer.¹ Customer service is also one area where you can gain a competitive advantage.

This chapter will help you create a customer service plan for your agritourism enterprise by helping you

- Develop customer service policies
- Establish methods to train employees
- Learn to evaluate customer service

What is Customer Service?

Customer service is defined as an organization's ability to meet the needs and desires of its customers. Excellent customer service is a vital part of marketing for agritourism enterprises. It is the ability of an organization to consistently exceed the expectations of its customers.

Customer service is displayed in the presentation of your agritourism enterprise and facilities as well as in the attitude, knowledge and behavior of you and your employees. Customer service begins before a customer arrives and ends long after the customer leaves your enterprise.

What is a Customer?

A customer is the most important person ever in this office — in person or by mail.

A customer is not dependent on us — we are dependent on him.

A customer is not an interruption of our work — he is the purpose of it.

We are not doing a favor by serving him — he is doing us a favor by giving us the opportunity to do so.

A customer is not someone to argue or match wits with. Nobody ever won an argument with a customer.

A customer is a person who brings us his wants. It is our job to handle them profitably to him and to ourselves.

*A sign at L.L. Bean Inc.
Philip Kotler, 1997, Marketing Management*

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¹Wreden, Nick. *How to Recover Lost Customers*. Available online at <http://www.smartbiz.com/article/articleview/112/1/7/> 14 July 2004.

What is customer service?²

Customer service is —	Customer Service is not —
Attention	Neglect
Courteous Words	Sharp Replies
Smiles	Bored Looks
Enthusiasm	Dullness
Response	Indifference
Warmth	Coldness
Understanding	Closed Mind
Patience	Irritation
Sincerity	Being Mechanical
Consideration	Annoyance
Remembering Details	Forgetting Details
Facts	Arguments
Creative Ideas	Humdrum
Giving	Receiving
Action	Delay
Appreciation	Apathy

Components of a Customer Service Plan

The importance of customer service to your agritourism enterprise dictates the need for a comprehensive customer service plan. A customer service plan has five major elements:

1. Customer Needs, Wants and Expectations — Find out what services your customers need, want and expect to receive from your enterprise.
2. Customer Service Goals and Objectives — Establish goals and objectives for your enterprise based on these needs, wants and expectations.
3. Customer Service Policies — Develop customer service policies for your enterprise.
4. Employee Training Policies — Train employees to implement your customer service policies.
5. Customer Service Evaluation — Evaluate the effectiveness of your customer service plan and make changes where needed.

Developing Your Customer Service Plan

Developing a written customer service plan for your agritourism enterprise may take some time and effort. The effort, however, is well spent as you strive to retain customers and build positive word-of-mouth referrals.

Customer Needs, Wants and Expectations

Your customer service planning should begin with a review of the needs, wants and expectations of your target audience. Does your target audience expect full-service and luxury amenities, self-service with only very basic amenities or something in between? Will your customers require individual attention from your employees to assist them with choosing products, an employee to serve as a guide to a group or just someone to point them in the direction of activities? Do your customers expect to have access to restroom facilities with running water or are port-a-johns acceptable? Do customers expect an employee to answer the business phone during business hours or is a recorded message acceptable?

You may learn more about your customers' needs, wants and expectations by

- Surveying, interviewing or holding focus groups to ask target consumers questions about their needs and expectations
- Reviewing customer comments and complaints
- Asking employees for observations and suggestions
- Evaluating sales and inventory data for returns and special orders
- Evaluating wait times for activities, check-out at register and phone calls
- Considering the service provided by competitors

²Adapted from Ramay Winchester and Lee Curtis. Tennessee Department of Tourist Development. *One Visitor/Customer at a Time Hospitality Training Program*. April 2002.

Once an evaluation is complete, you should determine whether

- Your customer service policies are effective in meeting your customers' needs, desires and expectations
- Your customer service policies need changes or adjustments
- Your employees are properly trained to implement your customer service policies
- Your employees are motivated to implement your customer service policies

Chapter Review

Providing excellent customer service based on the needs, wants and expectations of your target market is important in retaining customers and gaining positive word-of-mouth referrals. Excellent customer service, however, starts with a specific customer service plan that should include these steps:

1. Research your customers needs, wants and expectations
2. Establish customer service goals and objectives
3. Develop customer service policies
4. Train employees to implement the policies
5. Evaluate the effectiveness of your customer service plan

Additional Resources

1001 Ways to Reward Employees written by Bob Nelson (Workman Publishing, New York, 1994) provides some creative ideas on how to reward your employees.

FISH! (New York. Hyperion Press, 2000) and related books by Stephen C. Lundin, Ph.D.; Harry Paul; and John Christensen. A philosophy of choice for creating a team of alive, joyful, passionate and fully present employees. More information is available at <http://fishphilosophy.com>.

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