



Tools, tips and tactics for the frontline customer service professional

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This Month in Customer Service

Be a volunteer this season

Christmas is the leading holiday on most people's minds this time of year, but December is also the time for International Volunteer Day. And volunteering and helping others in the workplace is a good way to show that you are ready to move up. So take time this month to show your stuff by:


- **Volunteering.** When your manager or supervisor needs someone to do something extra, volunteer for the task. It's a good way to show off your skills and motivation.

- **Being dependable.** Show that you are ready to deal with whatever your job involves by being on time, being at your desk, and working late when necessary.

- **Knowing what's next.** What do you need to know, what skills do you need, and what training will you need to move up to the next step on the ladder? Create a plan for getting those things done.

And finally, don't forget to thank those coworkers who volunteered to help you when things got a little crazy on the job.



For more on volunteering, go to www.CustomerServiceGroup.com and click on "Web Extras." 

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Would a mentor help you become a better customer service rep?

To find the right mentor in your organization, you have to know what you are looking for, and you have to take ownership of the process.

A lot of companies have mentorship programs in place to help newer employees get up to speed on the job and to reduce those common feelings of intimidation and isolation. But even if your company doesn't have a formal mentorship program in place, that doesn't mean that you can't search out a mentor or mentors at any point in your career. A mentor can help you navigate the rough patches in dealing with customers, getting along with coworkers, and being successful in your organization.

In fact, says Elizabeth Ghaffari, CEO of Technology Place Inc. and author of *Tapping the Wisdom That Surrounds You*, "You have the choice of looking around you and selecting the people that you like, the people that you admire and that you wish to emulate." In Ghaffari's experience, you don't always have to have a one-to-one relationship with a mentor, and mentors don't even have to be people that you work with. They can be people you admire through books you've read or in the media or who you know from a distance. The point is that you admire them and they have some knowledge or wisdom that they can pass on to you.

But being a mentee — whatever the situation — requires work on your side as well.

Learn to clarify your needs

An important first step for anyone looking for a mentor is to take stock of oneself, says Ghaffari. "You have to make that conscious step to ask, 'What is it I need now? What knowledge or skills do I need to develop to take my next step toward accomplishing my ambitions?'" she says.

When Ghaffari does workshops or presentations on self-development, she says there are two types of people who come up afterward to talk and ask questions. "One is the type that says, 'Will you help me? Will you be my mentor? Will you give me the guidance that I need?'" — questions that are open-ended and unspecific," she says.

"The second type of individual will come up to me and say, 'This is

where I am, and what I have done. This is the kind of work that I do and the type of projects that I have worked on. And I have a vision of myself where I would like to be better at resolving problems, encouraging teamwork, or making presentations.' And that kind of conversation gives me more clarity about who they are, what they are trying to do, and what they are trying to accomplish," Ghaffari says.

Which individual has the higher probability of finding the right mentor? "It's the second one," she says. "The one who demonstrates a greater grasp of her competence, her challenges, the kinds of assistance that she needs, and how she will put that assistance to use."

She adds: "The more specific you can be about the kind of help that you need, the more likely you are to find a mentor that can help to meet that need. It provides a sense of where you are and where you are going."

Take ownership of the process

It's important that the mentee take ownership of what he or she is trying to accomplish — both in terms of who might be able to help, and when it might be time to move on.

First of all, when approaching a potential mentor, says Ghaffari, "It is up to the mentee to understand, 'Did I put out there the best request that I possibly can?' It's like being an entrepreneur and asking, 'Have I pitched myself well to this audience?'"

And if you get a rejection — the kind of feedback that says, "You and I are not going to work out" — "then you have to accept that and incorporate what you've learned into your next decision to pursue another potential mentor," she says. "Don't let the frustration bowl you over."

When someone asks you to be a mentor...

If you are a senior customer service representative, a younger, less experienced rep might ask you to be their mentor. How would you respond?

According to Elizabeth Ghaffari, author of *Tapping the Wisdom That Surrounds You*, "the best thing to do is to challenge the individual to clarify what it is that they are looking for. Ask them to describe their skills and what they would like to accomplish both in the organization and in their careers."

Then, if what they are looking for is something that you feel you can help with, set aside some time to discuss how you can do so. And if it is not something that you feel comfortable with, try to direct them to someone else in the organization who can help them, or towards other groups like book clubs, alumni groups, service clubs, and others — that might provide more of a group approach to some of the same skills and perspectives.

Customer service reps looking for mentors should also keep in mind that "you don't have to put your money on one mentor in an organization," says Ghaffari. "There are many possible mentors out there." It pays to think of mentorship as a process by which you identify your needs over time and identify potential new mentors as those needs change.

Ghaffari adds that part of taking ownership also involves knowing when a mentoring relationship is not working out — not giving you what you need — and politely stepping away from it to seek help from someone else.

Even groups can be mentors

When you think about it, even a corporate board can be seen as a group of people mentoring the CEO of an organization. And in any organization, Ghaffari says, "there are groups of people creating pools of wisdom where — instead of seeking a one-on-one relationship — people can tap a wider variety of skills and wisdom than they might have when working only with a single mentor."

Whether it is a book group, a service club, or a regularly scheduled "lunch and learn" group, "those kinds of experiences are very strong because they bring multiple perspectives to light, and the dialog is an important part of the learning experience," Ghaffari says.

"People bring their personal experiences, tell their personal stories, offer their personal perspectives. Those get challenged or other stories get told — and that is how we learn," she says. "We learn through the interaction of being challenged and concurrence by our peers as much as by our superiors."

Ghaffari also suggests that a reading group or book club can benefit a great deal by looking for books that present strong examples of people who have succeeded in some of the roles that you and other members of the group might aspire to.

So even if you can't find a one-on-one mentor, you can reap some of the same benefits through discussion groups and other workplace groups focused on sharing experiences and expertise. 