Attitude is everything

When customers come to you for service, do you greet them with a positive attitude? I just spent a solid week reviewing and analyzing student feedback about a number of diverse service areas that provide a variety of services to them. The purpose of the assessment was to look for service improvement opportunities. Regardless of the department or the type of service being provided, I found that perceived employee attitude consistently appears as an area of opportunity. It also appeared as a strength in some units. Now to be clear, I am not saying that the service provided to the customer was poor, nor that the students did not get the service they needed. I just saw a number of comments about interactions with staff, and made a note of how employee attitudes can affect their view of the service interaction, the department, and the university.

Statements about poor service were frequently accompanied by statements say service providers were:

- Not smiling or acting friendly toward customers.
- Making abrupt or short statements to customers. Not explaining important things to customers.
- Not paying attention to the customers during the interaction, instead talking with their coworkers, or focusing on their phones or computers.
- Acting bored, or like they did not want to be helping the customer. Speaking in monotone.

These are not subtle behaviors. They are readily apparent and the result is that customers perceive the employees as not liking their jobs. They see these service providers as being rude and aloof; and they have serious concerns about the quality of the services and information they receive from these employees. They are uncertain that their needs are going to be met correctly and completely.

The positive comments about employees essentially said that staff exhibited the opposite behaviors from those shown on the list above. The nice thing is that it is very easy to project a positive attitude. To illustrate this, I have to tell you about an interaction I had with a bank teller over twenty years ago. I had an account at a small bank, and one day went inside to conduct a transaction in person. I remember that I was having a miserable day, and was in a very bad mood. I walked up to a teller and she greeted me with energy, a smile and a very positive attitude. I was not an over-the-top greeting, just enthusiastic and pleasant. You could feel energy radiate from the woman. Throughout the entire transaction she was professional, friendly, smiled, and maintained a positive tone. When the transaction was complete I went back to my car, and to this day I can remember sitting behind the wheel and realizing that I was no longer in a bad mood. I had picked up some of her energy and could not remember why
I was having a bad day (I still can’t). My personal attitude change was all thanks to the interaction that I had with the bank teller.

Using her example, here are some simple strategies that will help ensure that customers experience a positive attitude and feel they are receiving the attention they deserve from you.

- Smile. This seems like common sense, but people forget to do it. This is especially true when they get caught up in their work or are having a difficult day themselves. Even if you do not feel like smiling, you can fake it. Research has shown that it is difficult for people to tell when someone is genuinely smiling vs. when they are faking it. There are small clues, but most people overlook them and assume any smile is a genuine one. With a little practice you can smile all the time and project a positive image to customers.

- Keep your voice upbeat. Help customers feel that you are interested in talking with them by putting some energy into your speech and speaking at a moderate pace. A moderate pace is not talking so slowly that your audience gets impatient for you to finish your thoughts, nor so fast that your ideas run together and it becomes difficult to understand what you are saying. Adding some volume to your voice and pitching the tone of your voice up slightly will also help them to perceive that you are enthusiastic about speaking with them.

- Do not be abrupt with customers. To avoid giving the appearance that you are being rude or abrupt with your customers, avoid using short one or two word statements to answer them. Additionally, be careful that your voice does not take on a hard, sarcastic, or angry-sounding tone. When talking with your customers, make sure you use complete sentences and clearly explain things to your customers. Taking time to interact and have a conversation with your customers will avoid them having the perception that you are being inconvenienced by them.

- Be friendly toward customers. Smiling and keeping a conversational approach with customers will go a long way toward them perceiving you as friendly. It is also a good idea to include some small talk or pleasantries in your conversations as well. Asking a person how their day is going, if they is anything else you can assist them with, and thanking them for coming in or calling do not take long to do, but also help the customer to perceive you as being friendly.

- Stay focused on the customer. When interacting with the customer, they should be your sole focus. Do not allow yourself to get distracted, or do things that make the customer think you are not listening or willing to help them. Put phones away and keep conversations with coworkers focused on the customer’s needs. It is one thing to socialize with your coworkers when there are no customers waiting,
but when a customer is right in front of you, the focus needs to be on them and addressing their needs.

If you personally provide a service to others, or if you supervise staff who do, please make sure that you pay close attention to attitude. Ask yourself, if we serve a customer right now are they going to walk away having experienced a positive attitude? Will they remember a simple interaction as a positive event twenty years from now? What can be done to make our service one that students will remember? If not, now it the time to start working on making that happen. As always, I welcome your questions and feedback. You can email me at clayton.taylor@asu.edu.

**About the author:**

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