Master the basics

The game of business
is very much like the game of tennis.
Those who fail to master the basics
of serving well, usually lose.

–Unknown

1. Remember that “walk the talk” service starts with the first few seconds of the first contact. You get only one shot at a good first impression. So, greet your customers warmly. Start phone contacts with: “Thank you for calling (XYZ Company).” Start face-to-face contacts with: “Welcome to (XYZ Company).” Customers take their business where they feel welcomed and appreciated.

2. DON’T LET CUSTOMERS FEEL INVISIBLE. Acknowledge walk-up customers immediately – even if it’s only to say, “Thanks for coming in. I’ll be able to help you in just a moment.” People will be more willing to wait patiently if you act like you know they’re there.

3. When customers are lined up waiting to be served, avoid the cold and impersonal “Next!” Instead, make eye contact with the next person in line, smile, and nod your head. Most people will understand that as an invitation to step forward. If you can’t make eye contact, try saying, “May I help the next person?”
4. Develop the habit of looking each customer in the eye during face-to-face service situations. Maintaining eye contact helps you focus on what the customer is saying, and it shows them that you’re interested in helping them.

5. USE THEIR NAME. Get the customer’s name early by asking, or by looking at their check, credit card, etc. Then use the name throughout the transaction. Use “Mr.” or “Ms.” unless you sense that the more personal first name is appropriate.

6. People like to have their names pronounced correctly. Make notations in your files showing the phonetic spelling of names that have unusual pronunciations. That way, you or the next employee to have contact with the customer will know the correct way to say the name.

7. TELL ’EM YOUR NAME. Starting service interactions with, “Welcome to XYZ Company. I’m Chris. How can I serve you?” makes the interaction more friendly and personal. The customer can connect with you as a person rather than a “server.”

8. Smile every time you greet customers in person and every time you answer the phone. Remember, you can hear smiles as well as see them. And smiling whenever you pick up the phone will keep you positive and upbeat. Try it … it really works!

9. Never leave a customer on hold for over one minute without reconnecting with a status report. Ask if they would prefer a callback. If so, get a phone number, get a convenient time, and make sure the return call happens!
10. Don’t just transfer a customer call – make sure the person you’re transferring to is there and can answer the question or solve the problem.

11. Respect the customer’s time. Never, ever make them wait for anything without offering an explanation, an apology, and an alternative to waiting.

12. Give the customer you’re serving 100% of your attention. Do paperwork, organizing, and other job duties on your time rather than theirs.

13. TALK LESS, LISTEN MORE. Make it your goal to understand the customer’s needs and expectations rather than “talking your way into a sale.” Listen to everything the customer says as if there was a test at the end. And confirm your understanding by paraphrasing: repeating back, in your own words, what the customer says (e.g., “What I hear you saying is ...”).

14. Pay attention to your body language – the unspoken, unwritten form of communication. Make a list of gestures, tone, stance, etc., that you find disturbing in others. Analyze the list – asking to what degree you may do the same disturbing things yourself. Then, make a conscious effort to avoid them.

15. Don’t be a ROBOT. If you have a verbal script you need to follow, personalize the delivery … put a little of yourself in it. Just reciting policies, procedures, and script lines makes you no different than a recording.

16. Always read back important information (customer’s name, address, phone, product or service ordered, shipping and billing details, etc.) to confirm you have recorded it correctly.
17. If you make a mistake when dealing with a customer, admit it, apologize for it, fix it, and move on. Customers really don’t expect you to be perfect. They do, however, expect you to be honest … and make a great recovery.

18. HONOR YOUR COMMITMENTS. Do what you say you’ll do. For example: If you tell a customer you’ll research why their shipment hasn’t arrived and get back to them before lunch, you better follow through – even if it’s just to call and say you’re still working on it. Customers occasionally make plans, schedule meetings, and make decisions based on what you tell them you’ll do. Fail to deliver, and they may conclude that your products and services are as bad as your word is.

19. UNDER PROMISE and OVER DELIVER! Keep your promises reasonable, but make what you provide for the customer extraordinary!

Little things …

Southwest Airlines insists on capitalizing the word “customer” wherever it is used – in ads, brochures, the annual report, etc. The practice may seem picayune, but what better way to flag employees and the public that the Customer matters.

Fortune Cookies, Vantage Books

20. Here’s a biggie: Never tell a customer that you can’t do something unless you immediately follow with a description of what you CAN do for them! Customer service is about DOING – not explaining or rationalizing what you’re not doing.
21. DON’T KNOW? FIND OUT! If you don’t know the answer to a customer’s question, don’t offer a guess (“I think…”). And never end the issue with, “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure.” Always conclude with: “... but I’ll be happy to get that information if it would be helpful for you.” If they do request an answer, get it and get back to them promptly. Even if they say “don’t bother,” get the answer anyway and get back to them. They’ll appreciate the extra service, and you’ll have the correct answer for the next time the question is asked.

22. Set a personal goal to become an expert on the products and services you offer. Read manuals and marketing brochures; talk with product developers, vendors, and service deliverers; use the products and services yourself. The more you know, the better your service will be.

23. ELIMINATE THE NEGATIVES. Make a conscious effort to minimize the use of negative words and phrases in your service interactions. Customers do not appreciate words like: can’t, won’t, don’t, not, no, and sorry. You need to look for every opportunity to say: can, will, do, yes, you bet, and absolutely.

24. LISTEN TO YOURSELF. Periodically tape-record your side of customer service phone calls. (Set the microphone close to your phone so you’ll pick up your voice, but the customer won’t be heard or recorded.) Play the tapes and analyze your performance. Hear yourself as the customer heard you. What did you do poorly that you need to correct? What did you do well that you need to continue doing? Consider asking a few co-workers to listen to the tape and give you feedback.

25. Remember that customers don’t like unpleasant, last-minute surprises. Immediately inform them of any unexpected delays. Contact them if something about their order has changed (item out of stock, delivery delay, lost shipment, etc.).
If children are part of the service situation, pay attention to them and make them feel important. Ask their names, give them compliments, or give them something special. This will enhance the service experience for the customer and increase the likelihood that they’ll come back.

Here are two “rules of thumb” for people in the repair business: 1) When you fix it, clean it! 2) When you’re finished fixing and cleaning it, put a sticker on it that has your company name and phone number … so the customer will remember who to call with any future problems or compliments.

Give every customer your very best service. Remember, you never know who you might be dealing with. Your next customer could be the president of the company, who testing the service. They could be a reporter doing an under-cover story about your operation. Perhaps they’re your boss’s spouse, who will definitely comment on the experience when they both get home. Or maybe they’re a competitor looking for an excellent customer service person to steal away at three times your salary. Think about it.

Take abbreviated notes throughout your conversations with customers. Start by jotting down their name, and then continue by writing words and short phrases that capture the essence of what the customer is saying.

As you approach the end of each customer interaction, do a short recap/summary of what you discussed, what you are going to do for them, what they can expect and when, and the benefits of their purchase – so they feel even better about their decision to do business with you.
31. Always, always, ALWAYS thank the customer for their business. Tell them how much you appreciate their choosing your organization for the products and services they need. Remember, it’s the customer who’s paying your salary – as well as paying for: the phone you’re talking on, the counter you’re standing behind, the vehicle you’re driving…

32. Another always: ALWAYS INVITE THEM BACK. Close your interactions with something like: “Please call again. We’d appreciate another opportunity to serve you,” or a simple “Please come back and see us again.” You’ll be amazed at the number of customers who’ll say, “I will”… and really will!

33. DON’T FORGET YOUR INTERNAL CUSTOMERS. Does your job involve providing services for other departments, groups, or individual employees within your organization? If so, those people are customers, too. They’re your customers, and they deserve the same level of good service as the general public who does business with your organization.

The “Golden Rule” proposes treating customers the way you want to be treated. The “Platinum Rule” says treat them the way they want to be treated. Perhaps it’s time for a new rule that’s closer to the concept of “empathy.” I’m not sure what precious metal to put in the name, but the rule goes like this:

Treat customers as if you were the customer!

Joel Marks
A “Crash Course” on Customer Service

The 10 most important words:
“I apologize for our mistake. Let me make it right.”

The 9 most important words:
“Thank you for your business. Please come back again.”

The 8 most important words:
“I’m not sure, but I will find out.”

The 7 most important words:
“What else can I do for you?”

The 6 most important words:
“What is most convenient for you?”

The 5 most important words:
“How may I serve you?”

The 4 most important words:
“How did we do?”

The 3 most important words:
“Glad you’re here!”

The 2 most important words:
“Thank you.”

The MOST important word:
“Yes.”