

A Special Report for IT Professionals

Become Your Customer's Hero

10 Steps to Excellent Customer Service



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This article first appeared in the Jan/Feb 2008 issue of International Spectrum magazine (www.intl-spectrum.com).



When you were little, did you ever dream of becoming a firefighter, a police officer, a superhero? Dream putting out fires, rescuing the damsel in distress, saving the day?

I bet you did.

While we may not be donning a red fire hat, police badge, or tights and a cape, those of us that work in IT are expected to be our customer's hero.

No, I'm not nuts. Think about it.

The reason businesses invest in technology is to make things easier, to make their businesses run smoother, to improve the bottom line. They hire people like us to, well, make it all work.

No matter if you work as a programmer in the deep realms of IT, a consultant directly interfacing with end-users, or are a vendor selling solutions, your customers are looking to you to solve their problems, put out the fires, rescue them from cumbersome or costly business issues, and basically save the day with technology.

Why Should You Become Your Customer's Hero?

Customers have the power to determine how many IT dollars are spent in your business. Seriously. The people you interface with and create solutions for influence how much IT is valued and respected. That perceived value determines the dollars allocated to IT.

If you are consultant or a vendor, you may have better feel for how important customers are. But I challenge to expand your viewpoint on who a customer is.

A customer is anyone who is using your services directly or indirectly. This includes co-workers, managers, CIOs, executives, end users, clients, even your business' suppliers and customers.

Whatever you call your customers, they have influence over your future in IT. Rave reviews are proliferated throughout today's networked world; but so are complaints and grumblings.

How you interact with others, with your customers, will influence how far you go in your career, in your company, in your marketplace, and in the IT industry in general.

So, how do you become your customers' hero?

1. Develop a Customer-Centric Focus

Yes, many of us love technology for the sake of technology, but our customers usually don't. I used to say that I hate computers, but I love what they can do for me. While I may have grown fond of technology for technology's sake, our customers generally haven't.

Our customers are often not fond of computers and know little about all the ins and outs, and they really don't understand that there are specialties. They use a computer because it helps make their job easier – or is supposed to. Our customers look to us to solve their computer problems and help keep everything working. We need to focus on their needs, not on the coolness of the technology or our own comfort zones.

2. Be Approachable

Let's face it. Most of us in IT are fairly introverted. We like spending time alone with our computers. Many of us can do without social contact for hours, some of us for days. But to truly succeed in IT, we must cultivate and spend some energy on our interpersonal skills.



We need to recognize that our customers are human and they genuinely want our help, but they would prefer to ask someone who is kind, considerate, and helpful instead of someone who is short, curt, or combative.

Yes, I know it's frustrating to be interrupted when you are deep in writing code or solving a complex problem. And yes, interruptions cost us time. But our customers are the reason we are employed.

Treating them kindly, with a smile and a friendly tone of voice, makes them feel like you respect them and are willing to help them out.

Think about it. Next time your house catches on fire, do you want emergency services asking "yeah, what do you want...?" or saying "sorry, I'm too busy right now." Or, "That's not my job." No. You want them to send someone to put out the fire. Be approachable. Be a person the customer wants to call.

3. Listen to Your Customers

Listening is an interesting skill – it's interactive. Listening is different than hearing. You can physically hear your customer words, but not really listen to what they are saying.

IT professionals, especially those of us who “go deep” and really focus on what we are doing and those of us who are manic multi-taskers, need to make a conscientious effort to put aside what we are focusing on or multitasking, turn our full attention to our customers, and truly listen to what they are telling us.



When your customer comes to you, stop what you are doing and really listen. Take the time to show that you comprehend what they are saying. Repeat back them what you understand the challenge to be: “So, what I understand you are saying is....”

Listening means asking questions when you don't understand and delving deeper into the customer's issue, trying to understand what they are want to accomplish. Listen not just to the words, but also the tone, body language (yes, you can often hear body language over the phone), and the silence. Take notes.

By taking the time to listen to your customer, you tell them that they are important. It builds trust. Your customer needs to trust you in order for you to be their hero.

4. Offer Solutions

Your customer is coming to you for solutions. They don't want to hear about the complexities or how much time something is going to take or how that isn't your area of expertise. They need help and they need to know what to do. If you don't have solution for the customer immediately, that is okay. Offer to find a solution or find someone that can help them out. The customer doesn't expect you to know everything; they expect you to help them find answers.

5. Understand the Business Impact



If the customer is coming to you with a business problem, take the time to understand it and understand how it fits into the bigger picture of the business and the business processes. If the customer is coming to you with a system problem, understand the scope of the issue from a business standpoint.

For example, if the customer needs to be able to update the payroll codes and percentages in the system, what kind of timeline do they need to do that by? If it is the day before the first payroll cycle of the year, the problem is huge. The business can't run payroll. Employees are usually not happy when they are not paid correctly. But if it is November and the payroll changes do not go into effect until January, then you have time to work on the problem.

Ask questions to find out the severity of the problem from a business perspective. Generally speaking, issues that prevent employees from working, customers from ordering, patients from making appointments, invoices or insurance forms from going out, or critical accounting process like payroll, month end, and year end from being performed are reasons to escalate a response.

6. Diffuse Negativity

Let's face it. Our customers are usually coming to us with a problem. They aren't always happy when they call us or appear in our offices or cubicles. Don't take things personally. Some customers need to vent. Some need to rant and rave. Some quietly fume and then erupt. But they all need solutions — not combat, blame, or finger pointing.

The problem exists. It really doesn't matter who caused it. While finding out how it was caused is part of the trouble shooting process, it is possible to do so without adding to a

negative situation. Your job is to diffuse the situation, to put the fire out, not fuel the flame.

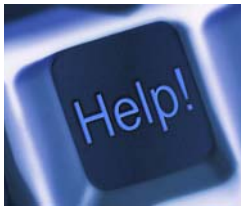
7. Be Careful with Assumptions

If you are making any assumptions, check them out with the customer to see if the assumptions are valid: “Just need to make sure I’m not making an invalid assumption here...” Use it as an opportunity to add value.

If you are troubleshooting a system error and suspect (assume) it is a user-induced error, keep things neutral. “Let’s just make sure the system is pulling the value correctly, can you read me what field xx says?”

Your customer will appreciate that you are taking the time to make sure things are correct before things go wrong or before spending a lot of time on invalid information.

8. Go the Extra Mile



When your customer is in a critical spot — the machine is down and employees are unable to work, billing isn’t going out, EDI isn’t working and their customers are screaming, the web site is down and they are losing revenue — be there for your customer.

Your customer needs to know you will move mountains for them when it really counts. They need to know that you will be there for them — that when five o’clock comes around, you aren’t going to walk out the door and leave them hanging.

If you have to leave, arrange for another co-worker to take over and get the customer back in business.

9. Follow Through

If you say you are going to do something, do it. Follow through. Make it happen. If your timeline slips, that's usually okay as long as you re-set expectations.

Your customer is relying on you, trusting you to deliver, to find solutions, to make it all come together. They are telling their boss that it is okay, that they've got it handled.

If you don't perform, if you don't follow through on what you said, then not only have you disappointed your customer, but you've also made them look bad in the eyes of their boss and their co-workers. You have compromised their integrity and career. Not a recipe for goodwill.

When you follow through, you are not only looking good, but your customer is looking good too.

10. Follow Up



Follow up with your customers. Give them a call or shoot them an e-mail. Make sure the solutions you created are working for them. Ask them about how things are going. Check to see if there is anything you can do for them. Build relationships. Let them know that you are there for them if they need help.

Heroism 101

Becoming a customer-centric IT professional is a journey. None of us are perfect; we are human. If you recognize an area above that you need to grow in, spend some time working on that area. Become your customer's hero in that one area. When you master that, pick another area to work on. It's a fun journey and being a hero has great perks!