No matter what’s going on in the “real” world, customer service must be a top priority for school nutrition professionals at every level.

BY PATRICIA L. FITZGERALD
Everyone’s headed back to school—hooray! (Everyone’s headed back to school—oh, no!) As we collectively embrace the hope and expectation that most schools will return to in-person learning—and in-cafeteria meal service—for the majority of the next 180-odd instructional days, we remain mindful of circumstances that will present new and continuing challenges, putting everyone’s spirits to the test. We’re talking about supply chain disruptions leading to product substitutions or menu alterations. About labor shortages that impact your menu goals. About divisive COVID-19 safety protocols. About a rising infection of crankiness and impatience. What will get us through these trials is an unwavering commitment to customer service.

Customer service should always be a priority in school nutrition operations, but it will be especially crucial in this school year. In addition to the challenges we just detailed, school nutrition is on the verge of an incredible opportunity. Federal waivers allow you to serve—and claim—all school meals for free, regardless of a student’s ability to pay. We can’t predict what will happen for SY2022-23, but in the likelihood that tiered reimbursements return, you want to take full advantage of this year to build customer loyalty that will transcend any future hesitancy about paying for school meals.

In honor of the start of SY2021-22, we present 21-22 customer service skills, strategies and mistakes to avoid. (We thought about compiling 2,122 items, but that seemed a bit overwhelming—for us and for you!) In our August 2021 issue, School Nutrition addressed two key areas of customer service: training and soliciting customer feedback. This supplemental article seeks to help drive home what each of us can do individually to deliver the kind of service that exceeds our own expectations and lifts our spirits as customers of restaurants, retail, utilities, government agencies, medical professionals and other societal interactions. This advice applies to interactions with all customers—students and parents, but also coworkers and school and district staff.

Fundamental Customer Service Skills

Be genuinely, objectively friendly in every encounter. Smile. Make eye contact. Offer an enthusiastic greeting. Follow up with a secondary statement or question: “I like your T-shirt.” “The wind is crazy today!” “Ready for the weekend?” Don’t wait to be engaged, but if the customer speaks first, respond with
warmth, no matter what comment they have opened with.

Mean it. Customers can immediately tell the difference between a flat, scripted “GoodmorninghowcanIhelpyou,” and one that conveys real engagement. Ask a buddy to observe you for a few days to give you some pointers on body language and vocal tone.

Just not feeling particularly friendly today for any number of legitimate reasons? Channel your internal acting skills to fake it—and you may find that after a few engagements, you can compartmentalize your troubles for a period of time while you connect with your customers.

2 Know more than the minimum requirements of your job. Ask questions that help to define the bigger picture. Make it your business to understand the context and reason for rules, policies, actions and decisions. Knowledge is empowering! It will help you answer questions or clarify confusion with accuracy and confidence. It will also help you to look with fresh eyes at common concerns or hurdles, identifying potential solutions or enhanced service to customers.

Anticipate what your customers need and want. Develop a mindset where you regularly project yourself into their shoes and look at your cafeteria operation through that lens. When you introduce a new menu item or need to substitute an expected entrée, what do customers need to know about this? What will they want to know? If possible, provide that information before they ask or make uninformed decisions.

When you are in a team meeting a month into the new school year, discussing what’s working and not working, have suggestions ready that go beyond behind-the-scenes challenges. Predict likely customer expectations for the coming months and determine if you are prepared to handle these as a team.

Be willing to improve. Delivering excellent customer service starts by recognizing that you are not perfect. No matter how much you know about school meals, or how responsive you are to problems or how great your reputation is for being every kid’s favorite lunch lady/dude, you can be better. Ask for feedback, specifically inviting constructive criticism. It can be from customers, but it can also come from supervisors and
coworkers. Accept what they have to say—and if you don't understand or you disagree, seek clarification and specific suggestions on what you can do differently.

5 Remember the “why.” How lucky you are to work in a mission-driven profession where the “whys” of both what you do and the importance of customer service are so obvious! Everything you do is about feeding children nutritious and delicious meals that will help them thrive. When this goal is top of mind, customer service is a natural consequence.

No one is suggesting that customer service is easy, especially in school cafeterias. Time is tight—as is space in many cases. Kids can be rambunctious and rude. There’s pressure to get kids through the serving line quickly to give them as much time as possible to wolf down their meal. Given these typical conditions, the addition of complicated questions, complaints or concerns can test the patience of a saint. But if you anticipate (#3) what these might be, brush up on your knowledge (#2), are willing to improve (#4) and remember the “why” (#5), then patience is easier to find and maintain, and you will be able to deliver friendly (#1) customer service under all conditions!

Critical Customer Service Strategies for SY2021-22

For several weeks, distributors and manufacturers/processors have been warning their customers about disruptions in the supply chain. [Editors’ Note: Read “Tsunami Warning,” in SN’s August 2021 issue to better understand the scope and severity of the problems.] On top of this, many school districts are struggling to fill vacant positions on cafeteria teams.

These struggles could affect students in different ways, such as fewer overall menu options than they are used to seeing in the cafeteria, changes in preferred menu items, a reduced cycle menu (with the same items being served more frequently) and last-minute menu changes. Frequent communication with students is essential for managing expectations. Use all communications channels at your disposal: social media forums, dining area displays, serving area signage, apps and so on. You also may want to meet with representatives of the student government or another advisory group and request their help in outreach to peers. Focus your messaging on the possibility or even
likelihood of changes, as well as providing specific updates every time you have to pivot. Frequent communication with parents is arguably even more important, as many have even higher expectations from the school cafeteria than their children. We’re already seeing some parents of young children complain on social media about planning meal participation based on published menus and having substitutions made without warning. In addition, parents may be disappointed to hear if you have to scale back some of your signature offerings, such as scratch-made entrées or customizable stations.

You can appeal to their patience—and to their trust in your reputation—by explaining that you are doing all you can under the current circumstances. But get ahead of the communication curve! Post on social media, but don’t risk missing members of this key stakeholder group: Send a letter to all households that details some of the challenges, while reassuring them of your commitment to quality and service. Ask to get on the agenda of parent-teacher association meetings. Also remember that updates are crucial for this audience. Develop a calendar of parent-focused communications for the first half of the school year.

Frequent communication with administrators at the district and school site-level is important, too. (Are you sensing a theme here?) You don’t want the principal or superintendent to be surprised by a complaint that went over your head. You might want to supply administrators with a short list of talking points that describe how different challenges affect school meal service.

To ensure that your messages to students, parents and school administrators is accurate and anticipatory, you need to be in frequent communication with suppliers. Remember the value of knowledge (#2) in delivering exceptional customer service? Don’t wait for distributors and manufacturers to contact you about changes—or (worse) to show up with substitutions or (even worse) miss deliveries altogether. Make a plan to reach out regularly requesting updates, as well as for advice on how best to tweak your orders to get what you need, even if it’s not exactly what was originally specified.
Frequent communication with your own staff is also essential. Make sure that those frontline employees have the knowledge (12) they need to answer questions and respond to concerns from students and parents. Customer service is a team effort!

After the last 18 months, everyone is tired of pivoting and adapting to change. It may not seem fair that you are asked to rise above your own feelings and frustrations to respond, with a smile, to complaints, but you do it anyway. So it’s understandable that when meal service is over, and it’s just you and your coworkers, you want to vent about the situation. Resist this temptation and avoid spreading negativity.

It may seem like a welcome relief to share your miseries with others who can relate, but it’s a fallacy to think that anyone truly feels better after doing so. It’s more likely that all of you will simply feel more exasperated about the circumstances that are beyond your control—and less empathetic with customers who are impatient and dissatisfied when you are doing the best you can. Instead of dwelling on this with colleagues, find other outlets to relieve stress, tension and anxiety, from exercise to walks in nature to meetings with a professional counselor.

Customer Service in the Face of Complaints

13 When someone comes to you with a complaint or accusation, you should always respond as if everyone is watching—even if you are alone with the customer. This mindset will help you keep your guard up and avoid saying something you wished you hadn’t or speaking in a manner you might regret later.

Empathy is a critical skill set—especially when facing a customer who is upset. Empathy means imagining how you might feel given a similar set of circumstances. It also means being open to the possibilities of contributing factors that haven’t been expressed or identified. Maybe the angry parent is dealing with a family illness or the rude student had just earned a detention for acting up in class. Channeling your inner empath is a way to separate the emotions from the situation and focus on a solution.

Often, an upset customer simply wants to feel heard, and you can reduce tensions by demonstrating active listening. Techniques include paying attention and ignoring distractions, providing body language cues that demonstrate you are listening, paraphrasing what you heard, keeping an
open mind and responding appropriately.

[Editors’ Note: Read “Listen Better To Lead Better” in SN’s March 2021 issue and check out “LEARN to Master Difficult Conversations,” a module in the free LEAD to Succeed™ training program available at www.schoolnutrition.org/trainingzone.]

16 Stay calm, even if the tone becomes accusatory or combative. If the customer resists your calm manner and tone—and your active listening skills—you can politely end the conversation, with assurance that you or your supervisor will follow up later.

17 If follow-up is required—regardless of whether the conversation ended on a positive or negative note—be sure to respond promptly. In fact, even if the customer doesn’t expect a follow-up, if one is appropriate, you can exceed those expectations by reaching out to the customer with a report or update about the situation. You can also express that you wanted to check back in to ensure that the customer feels the problem has been resolved and that they are not experiencing any other frustrations.

18 Take accountability for the customer’s unhappiness. Even if the problem is not your “fault,” you are a representative of the school nutrition program, and your customer service goal is customer satisfaction. The customer is clearly unsatisfied, and that’s ultimately the responsibility of the team. Don’t pass the buck, don’t shrug and say your hands are tied (even if they are). Apologize for the customer’s unhappiness, do what you can to make it right—and if you can’t give them exactly what they want, explain the reasons with knowledge (#2), patience (#6) and empathy (#14).

19 Whether the complaint is legitimate or over-blown, don’t get defensive. This will only serve to escalate tensions, which is the exact opposite of customer service. This is difficult to do, especially if you feel attacked, but training and role-playing exercises can help you to build skills and develop language to handle the situation without getting drawn into issues of “fault.”

20 Customer complaints are often expressed in an accusatory, unforgiving and highly personal manner. “You (or your team) have made a horrible mistake that cannot be tolerated.” But even if the complaint is expressed personally, you shouldn’t take it personally.
You know logically that the customer is being reactive or provocative and may not have all the facts. In this moment, your job is to lower the temperature and then work toward a solution.

Don’t take it to heart, either. Let’s say that the complaint is serious and can be legitimately traced back to an area for which you have personal responsibility. Allow yourself some remorse, and reflect on what you’ve learned from the incident. But don’t obsess or beat yourself up about it. You’re only human and mistakes sometimes happen.

An Attitude of Gratitude
Bet you’ve been wondering since the start of this article, what it meant that we had compiled “21-22” suggestions. That’s because this final one is something of a take-it-or-leave-it tip, and your choice determines whether it “counts” as #22.

Always say “Thank you”—and always mean it. The first part of this strategy is actually a customer service fundamental. You should end every customer interaction with a “thank you,” whether it’s for their participation in your program, a smile that melts your heart or expressions of honest feedback. Saying “thank you” is important in less-than-pleasant exchanges, as well, although it’s harder to feel genuine gratitude for these.

Still, if you keep in mind that every customer connection is overflowing with opportunity, then saying an authentic “thank you” should come a bit more easily. Complaints, demands and accusations can be very difficult to hear, but they are opportunities to learn and to improve. They also provide terrific occasions for you to hone your customer service skills and challenge yourself to transform current dissatisfaction into future loyalty! SN+

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