

Chapter 5

Customer Service



Chapter Overview

Customers are the lifeblood of your business so the happier they are, the better for you. Customer satisfaction is often linked to customer service, and customer service is a major factor in customer retention and whether you receive positive or negative word-of-mouth referrals. Customer retention is important to the bottom line: research shows that it costs three to five times more to replace than to keep a customer.¹ Customer service is also one area where you can gain a competitive advantage.

This chapter will help you create a customer service plan for your agritourism enterprise by helping you

- Develop customer service policies
- Establish methods to train employees
- Learn to evaluate customer service

What is Customer Service?

Customer service is defined as an organization's ability to meet the needs and desires of its customers. Excellent customer service is a vital part of marketing for agritourism enterprises. It is the ability of an organization to consistently exceed the expectations of its customers.

Customer service is displayed in the presentation of your agritourism enterprise and facilities as well as in the attitude, knowledge and behavior of you and your employees. Customer service begins before a customer arrives and ends long after the customer leaves your enterprise.

What is a Customer?

A customer is the most important person ever in this office — in person or by mail.

A customer is not dependent on us — we are dependent on him.

A customer is not an interruption of our work — he is the purpose of it.

We are not doing a favor by serving him — he is doing us a favor by giving us the opportunity to do so.

A customer is not someone to argue or match wits with. Nobody ever won an argument with a customer.

A customer is a person who brings us his wants. It is our job to handle them profitably to him and to ourselves.

*A sign at L.L. Bean Inc.
Philip Kotler, 1997, Marketing Management*

Chapter Overview	49
What is Customer Service?	49
Components of a Customer Service Plan	50
Developing Your Customer Service Plan	50
Chapter Review	55
Additional Resources	55

¹Wreden, Nick. *How to Recover Lost Customers*. Available online at <http://www.smartbiz.com/article/articleview/112/1/7/> 14 July 2004.

What is customer service?²

Customer service is —	Customer Service is not —
Attention	Neglect
Courteous Words	Sharp Replies
Smiles	Bored Looks
Enthusiasm	Dullness
Response	Indifference
Warmth	Coldness
Understanding	Closed Mind
Patience	Irritation
Sincerity	Being Mechanical
Consideration	Annoyance
Remembering Details	Forgetting Details
Facts	Arguments
Creative Ideas	Humdrum
Giving	Receiving
Action	Delay
Appreciation	Apathy

Components of a Customer Service Plan

The importance of customer service to your agritourism enterprise dictates the need for a comprehensive customer service plan. A customer service plan has five major elements:

1. Customer Needs, Wants and Expectations — Find out what services your customers need, want and expect to receive from your enterprise.
2. Customer Service Goals and Objectives — Establish goals and objectives for your enterprise based on these needs, wants and expectations.
3. Customer Service Policies — Develop customer service policies for your enterprise.
4. Employee Training Policies — Train employees to implement your customer service policies.
5. Customer Service Evaluation — Evaluate the effectiveness of your customer service plan and make changes where needed.

Developing Your Customer Service Plan

Developing a written customer service plan for your agritourism enterprise may take some time and effort. The effort, however, is well spent as you strive to retain customers and build positive word-of-mouth referrals.

Customer Needs, Wants and Expectations

Your customer service planning should begin with a review of the needs, wants and expectations of your target audience. Does your target audience expect full-service and luxury amenities, self-service with only very basic amenities or something in between? Will your customers require individual attention from your employees to assist them with choosing products, an employee to serve as a guide to a group or just someone to point them in the direction of activities? Do your customers expect to have access to restroom facilities with running water or are port-a-johns acceptable? Do customers expect an employee to answer the business phone during business hours or is a recorded message acceptable?

You may learn more about your customers' needs, wants and expectations by

- Surveying, interviewing or holding focus groups to ask target consumers questions about their needs and expectations
- Reviewing customer comments and complaints
- Asking employees for observations and suggestions
- Evaluating sales and inventory data for returns and special orders
- Evaluating wait times for activities, check-out at register and phone calls
- Considering the service provided by competitors

²Adapted from Ramay Winchester and Lee Curtis. Tennessee Department of Tourist Development. *One Visitor/Customer at a Time Hospitality Training Program*. April 2002.

Describe the customer service needs, wants and expectations of your target audience.

Customer Service Goals and Objectives

The second component in a customer service plan is the establishment of goals and objectives for customer service. Your goals and objectives should be consistent with

- The needs, wants and expectations of your target audience
- Your overall enterprise goals
- The market positioning of your enterprise

Customer service goals may cover a wide variety of topics, including your attitude and the attitude of your employees, number and type of amenities provided or offered, number and type of services provided or offered, cleanliness of the enterprise, convenience of products and services offered, speed of service, and availability of and interaction of employees with customers.

Develop customer service goals for your agritourism enterprise.

Customer Service Policies

The third component in a customer service plan is the development of specific policies to meet your goals and objectives. Although detailed policies will vary, a few basics will apply to most enterprises:³

- Display a positive attitude.
- Make sure you are well-groomed and look neat or are dressed consistently with the desired image or ambiance of the enterprise.
- Keep all facilities clean and attractive.
- Immediately welcome customers with a friendly greeting.
- Smile and use positive body language.
- Be courteous and polite to customers and co-workers.
- Listen to customers.
- Use the name of the customer when possible.
- Maintain eye contact with customers.
- Anticipate the needs of customers and try to meet those needs.
- Treat each customer as a special guest or VIP.
- Promise only what you can deliver.
- Be knowledgeable about your products and services.

- When possible, get to know customers and develop relationships by asking them questions about themselves and their families.
- Thank customers for their business at the end of their visit and, when appropriate, with a phone call or note following the visit.
- Invite customers to come again.

Your enterprise may also need specific customer service policies on additional topics:

- Product returns and exchanges
- Admission refunds
- Reservations and/or private parties
- Deposits
- Payment options—cash, check, credit cards, charge accounts
- Special orders
- Layaway
- Answering phones and e-mail
- Home delivery
- Mail delivery
- Customer complaints (See “Handling Customer Complaints” on page 131 of the Appendix.)

Develop specific customer service policies for your enterprise.

³Adapted from Ramay Winchester and Lee Curtis. Tennessee Department of Tourist Development. *One Visitor/Customer at a Time Hospitality Training Program*. April 2002.

Employee Training Policies

Customer service should be the responsibility of everyone involved with an agritourism enterprise. Agritourism enterprises may be staffed by employees, volunteers or family members, all of whom should be trained to provide the quality of service your customers expect. Assume, for the purposes of this chapter, that the term "employees" includes all those who will serve customers. Once policies are established, it is important to communicate them to employees and train employees to implement them. Do not expect your employees to already know how to provide excellent customer service. Take the necessary steps to ensure that your employees are prepared to provide, and do provide, the standard of service that you expect.

It is also important for you to invest in employee relations and employee motivation. You may want to think of your employees as "internal customers" and your customers as "external customers." If you treat your employees with courtesy and respect, they are more likely to treat your customers with that same courtesy and respect. By offering your internal customers (employees) recognition and praise, the feeling of achievement will likely be reflected in the service they provide to your external customers.

The following steps will help ensure that employees provide excellent customer service:

- Communicate goals, objectives and expectations about customer service to your employees.
- Train employees to be knowledgeable about the products and services offered.
- Train employees in how to answer telephones and give simple, accurate directions to your business.
- Help your employees develop a sense of pride in their position and praise them for specific efforts.
- Empower employees to responsibly manage customer problems.
- Treat your employees with care and respect.
- Recognize and praise employees immediately. Tell employees specifically what they did well.

These steps may be implemented through employee training meetings, one-on-one training, job shadowing sessions, role-playing exercises and everyday interaction.

Describe how you will train employees to implement your customer service policies.

Once an evaluation is complete, you should determine whether

- Your customer service policies are effective in meeting your customers' needs, desires and expectations
- Your customer service policies need changes or adjustments
- Your employees are properly trained to implement your customer service policies
- Your employees are motivated to implement your customer service policies

Chapter Review

Providing excellent customer service based on the needs, wants and expectations of your target market is important in retaining customers and gaining positive word-of-mouth referrals. Excellent customer service, however, starts with a specific customer service plan that should include these steps:

1. Research your customers needs, wants and expectations
2. Establish customer service goals and objectives
3. Develop customer service policies
4. Train employees to implement the policies
5. Evaluate the effectiveness of your customer service plan

Additional Resources

1001 Ways to Reward Employees written by Bob Nelson (Workman Publishing, New York, 1994) provides some creative ideas on how to reward your employees.

FISH! (New York. Hyperion Press, 2000) and related books by Stephen C. Lundin, Ph.D.; Harry Paul; and John Christensen. A philosophy of choice for creating a team of alive, joyful, passionate and fully present employees. More information is available at <http://fishphilosophy.com>.

Chapter 5 Authors

Megan L. Bruch, Extension Specialist, *Center for Profitable Agriculture*

Ramay Winchester, Economic Development Specialist, Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development