

# Food Service & Nutrition

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## **IF YOU'RE NOT DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF CUSTOMER SERVICE, THEN WHAT ARE YOU SERVING?**

By Kathy Stephens, Ph.D., RD, LD

**D**o you recognize me? I am the customer waiting patiently at the café serving line while a supervisor and employee complete their chat. I am the patient with the broken leg in room 504 staring at the lunch tray which was dropped off out of reach. I am also the parent waiting on telephone hold just to order a milkshake

for my very sick child. When I seem irritated at waiting, I am labelled a difficult customer. Do you recognize me?

Unfortunately, these and similar scenarios continue to impose a powerful and negative impact on customer perceptions. This is in spite of the fact that customer service improvement initiatives have been on our radar for at least two decades.

Today, expectations for healthcare food service are higher than ever before. Our customers are becoming more sophisticated about food and service and therefore expect more from us. The traditional dietary models of food and service are falling by the wayside and being replaced with culinary and hospitality-focused models. This is not rocket science. However, attaining excellent customer service outcomes within budget, labour and a myriad of other constraints is no easy task.

There are significant and numerous components of the customer service matrix in healthcare food service. For example, under most circumstances, patients prefer to select from a menu and to eat their meals when they are ready to eat (thus the reason behind the room service concept success). They want their hot foods hot and their cold foods cold. Tray appearance and employee uniforms must be visually appealing.

On the retail side of the business, customers expect variety with value, a pleasant dining ambiance and speed of service. The food must look great, smell great and taste great. To be sure, all are important and necessary aspects of meeting customer expectations, but how we make people feel is one of the most important aspects of customer service. How we make people feel special begins with the right communication.

### **COMMUNICATION IS THE SOUL OF CUSTOMER SERVICE**

Building a culture of customer service starts with communication. There are five distinct components of communication: words, tone of voice, body language, listening and attitude. Our choice of words and phrases can make a positive or negative impression. For instance, when food and nutrition service employees distribute trays to

patients, we have found that patients appreciate that we knock and ask permission to enter. Next we introduce ourselves and say why we are there. For example, "Mrs. Jones, my name is Kathy and I have your lunch tray. May I come in?" Using the right words at the right moments makes them feel respected with courtesy. Before leaving the room, a simple phrase like "Is there anything else I can do for you before I leave?" These words convey a perception of caring and courtesy. Likewise, in the café, there are scripted words and phrases that can enhance the cus-

tomers' overall experience with their dining visit. Greeting the customers with variations of "welcome to our café" and "so glad you came back to dine with us today" make the customers feel welcome. Closing the interaction with words and phrases like "enjoy your meal" and "hope to see you tomorrow" makes the customer feel that we appreciate their visits.

On the other hand, there are also words and phrases that should never be used or used only with clarifiers. For example, we would never tell a customer that we can't get something

for them because we are short of staff. Also, we would never tell a customer, "I don't know," but we could clarify by saying, "I don't know, but I will find someone who does." Having a list of acceptable words and key phrases for various scenarios and situations is a must when building a customer service culture. Because they know just what to say and when to say it, scripting also adds the secondary benefit of increasing employee confidence.

Tone of voice is the second major component of customer service communication. Our voices tell a customer



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# COMMUNICATION IS THE SOUL OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

a great deal about how we feel about ourselves and about them. A terse or snippy tone relays anger, impatience or frustration and may make the customer feel uncomfortable or angry. Using a higher-than-normal pitch during an interaction with a senior is offensive and belittling. An effective tone should be one that is warm, casual, calm and enthusiastic. It makes our customers feel good. We have found it helpful for employees to listen to their recorded voice or to think about an experience when another's negative tone of voice made them feel uncomfortable in the past.

Words and tone of voice may say one thing, but the real message comes through in body language: stance, facial expressions and other physical movements. As a food service manager, I would often walk through my kitchen areas with a frown on my face while pondering the challenges of the day. I did not realize that my employees were interpreting that frown as anger toward them. Likewise, if our employees serve our customers with a scowl, the customer will obviously not feel very good about their experience with our department. Eye contact and a nice smile are the two most important aspects of body language. Both are courteous gestures and show that we care about the customer. Employees generally enjoy the classes and discussions on body language, but there are many that have a difficult time with the smile and eye contact. Videotaping, playback and coaching helps some team members.

Most of customer service communication requires listening to the customer and focusing on their needs. Unfortunately, while the customer is talking, we tend to concentrate on

forming our next words and tune out what they are saying to us. Customers pick up on this and form the impression that we might not really care about them. Ask questions and focus on the customer's words, tone of voice, body language and perhaps what they are not saying. Become cautious about making assumptions. When in doubt, clarify.

If communication is the soul of customer service, then attitude is the structure that supports that soul. Excellent communication is tone of voice, body language, listening, 25 per cent words and 75 per cent attitude. In a well-known prose entitled *Attitude*, minister and author Charles R. Swindoll tells us that attitude "will make or break a company... a home. The remarkable thing is that we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day." A positive attitude in our workforce leads to positive customer service outcomes and a motivated work force in which morale is very high.

No one wants to work around or be served by a negative person. DM&A, a U.S.-based firm that provides consulting services to the institutional food service industry, has coined a phrase to describe this negative behaviour – Stinkin' Thinkin' – a powerful force to reckon with. However, skill is much easier to train than attitude and courtesy. Here are some suggestions to promote a culture of customer service:

- Hire and promote employees with delightful customer-service skills and experience;
- Develop a detailed list of your standards and expectations for customer service;
- Include the five components of customer satisfaction in your

standards;

- Ensure that your employees understand these standards and expectations and that they learn how to meet them through training;
- Hold employees accountable for the standards and expectations (Operational audits work great because they are objective snapshots in time and take emotions out of the process.);
- Develop a feedback mechanism for customer service evaluation;
- Reward, recognize and celebrate when customer service milestones have been realized;
- Develop an understanding with team members that customer service standards are also a part of how we treat members of the food and nutrition team.

Once the food and nutrition department implements steps toward a culture of customer service, customers become raving fans, and the department is viewed as a customer-service role model in the hospital and often in the community. Customer satisfaction scores increase. Employee morale increases because they gain the respect of others. And, great customer service is just the right thing to do. How can you afford not to embrace this roadmap to excellent customer service? ■ ■ ■ ■

Kathy Stephens is an executive success coach at DM&A (formerly Don Miller & Associates). She uses her 30 years of leadership experience in academics, clinical nutrition management and food service management to help her clients transform their operations into models of excellence.

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