Go The Extra Mile
Building a Service-Oriented Business
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The Extra Mile: Your Competitive Advantage

Going the extra mile. It’s what distinguishes a great customer experience from an average one. And it can be what helps your company beat out larger competitors and win new customers. As a small or midsize business owner, you may not be able to provide products or services as inexpensively as the bigger players, but you can offer greater value by providing personalized customer care.

Providing truly outstanding support for your customers or clients entails more than merely placing good people on the front lines. It includes taking your company’s approach to customer service into account with every hiring decision, and considering it when implementing employee training and rewards programs. This guide offers advice on how to build a service culture within your organization by hiring the right people and further developing the service-oriented superstars you already have on staff. We hope you find it useful and invite you to contact us for help with any of your staffing needs.

“Fundamentally, customer service is a talent and personality trait.”
— Kent Lewis, president and founder of Arvil Media, Inc.

Read about his company’s customer-service strategies.
Hiring With an Eye Toward Service

Many businesses assume only those employees who are the first point of contact with customers need to be predisposed to providing excellent service. However, all employees whose primary purpose is to offer support, whether to internal “clients” or external customers, should be service-minded. Hiring people who share a common dedication to exceeding expectations – for customers as well as coworkers – can provide you with a significant competitive edge. The following information can help you identify those with the greatest potential.

What to Watch for in Resumes

At the resume-screening stage, look for indications that the applicant has experience working with internal and external “customers” and exceeding performance goals, including:

- **Quantifiable results.** A job candidate may claim that in previous jobs he or she recommended a better way to deliver merchandise or services, cut response time, enhanced the customer’s experience or simplified communication processes with customers. If the applicant has not provided details that quantify these accomplishments, make a note to probe further during the job interview. What impact did these accomplishments have on customer satisfaction or new business development?

- **Action-oriented words.** Look for action verbs like assisted, solved, supported and improved. These can be useful indicators of service experience. But also keep an eye out for words that serve as smokescreens. Buzzwords like optimized and vague phrases such as involved with or participated in could be used to obscure a lack of real experience.

- **Previous service roles.** Review the candidate’s work history for jobs that brought him or her into direct and frequent contact with the public. Previous work as a food server, receptionist, librarian, sales clerk, help desk technician or bank teller, for example, indicates real-world service experience. Even if a candidate held this type of role during an internship, as a first job out of college or in between full-time jobs, the experience may have built valuable service skills.

Believe it or not, simply following instructions can be a sign someone has a service mindset. Did the applicant follow your guidelines for resume formatting or submission? Did he or she send the resume as an email attachment even though your job posting specified otherwise? If you asked candidates to fill out an online form and follow up with a hard-copy resume, how many followed these directions?

Individuals who do it “their way” despite specific guidelines may be merely careless, or they may resist (as a matter of principle) being told what to do. Either trait could spell trouble in future interactions with customers or clients, particularly when service problems arise. If you are impressed by someone’s work history, but have initial concerns after the phone screen, use the in-person interview to probe further by asking open-ended, hypothetical questions (e.g., “If you were instructed to perform a task by following a specific set of directions, without being given an explanation as to why you should follow this method, how would you react?”). Is the applicant willing to ask for clarification if instructions are unclear, or does he or she become frustrated and blame “poor directions” for not completing a task properly? Does the individual simply do as told without question? This may indicate a lack of engagement or critical-thinking skills.
Making the Most of the Interview

The interview will likely give you the greatest sense of a candidate’s dedication to service. A good rule of thumb is to ask each job candidate the same set of questions designed to gauge this trait. This will help you compare their responses objectively. Look for evidence of sensitivity to others’ needs, a willingness to quickly resolve issues, the ability to put others’ priorities first, a calm demeanor in the face of challenges, and the maturity to recognize and correct mistakes or lapses in service.

Following are five questions that can help you solicit detailed information about a job candidate’s service mindset and how to read between the lines when considering his or her responses:

1. “Tell me about an occasion in which you didn’t meet the needs of a customer or client and how you addressed the situation.”

   How to read between the lines: Look for specific details; nearly all candidates who have worked with clients or customers should be able to recall at least one challenging situation. Those who cannot provide an example may not be answering your questions candidly. Pay attention to how each applicant describes the customer or client involved: Does he or she show empathy? How did the candidate work to resolve the situation? Was there follow-up with the disgruntled client or customer?

2. “How did you handle a client or customer who was difficult to please?”

   How to read between the lines: In addition to gaining insight into the candidate’s customer-service skills, you also can see how the applicant defines someone who is “difficult to please.”

3. “In jobs where you’ve had customer-service responsibilities, what did and didn’t you like about those roles?”

   How to read between the lines: The strongest candidates tend to display a genuine appreciation for solving someone’s problem and interacting with customers. Beware of those whose dislikes involve “working with difficult customers or colleagues.” Top customer-service professionals often relish the challenge of appeasing difficult people.

4. “What do you think constitutes excellent customer service?”

   How to read between the lines: Look for answers that go beyond merely satisfying customers to transforming them into “fans” of the company.

5. “What is your greatest work-related accomplishment?”

   How to read between the lines: This question not only yields insight into a person’s career milestones but also how the person defines success: Was it by meeting a tough deadline for a client, winning a customer-service award or helping his or her manager with a challenging assignment? Or was it a more personal victory?
Making the Most of the Interview

The in-person interview is also the ideal time to follow up on questions you had about the resume, such as candidate accomplishments that relate to service. Try to get more details about these claims by asking direct questions, including, “How much new/repeat business did you bring in?” and “How was success measured, and what were the exact results of your initiative?”

When the interview is over, walk the candidate out and observe his or her interactions with others. Does the applicant say good-bye to your front-office staff or ignore them? Does he or she greet strangers in the hallway, hold open the elevator or step aside so someone can pass through the doorway? An applicant’s overall demeanor and behavior toward people they may never see again will tell you a great deal about their level of courtesy and regard for others.

Here’s one last reliable indicator of a service-oriented attitude: a prompt thank-you note from the candidate after the interview. Don’t discount people who thank you via email – that’s acceptable etiquette today. But you may want to give a few extra points to someone who makes the effort to hand-write a personal note.
Questions to Ask During a Reference Check

The following are suggested questions to ask a job candidate’s colleagues, supervisors and other references. The answers you receive will help you gain insight into the applicant’s service skills:

- “In his previous position, how did Todd handle difficult or demanding colleagues or customers?”
- “How did Angela react when asked to take on duties outside the scope of her job description?”
- “Would you describe Ben as proactive or reactive when it comes to meeting customers’ needs? Can you give me an example?”
- “Please describe Tracy’s demeanor when interacting with customers, coworkers and supervisors.”
- “Ellen has applied for a customer-facing position. Based on your knowledge of this candidate, how do you think she would perform in that role?”
Hiring people who are inclined to go the extra mile is the first step to creating a service culture within your firm. You can help your team be more effective by offering training in this area. Following are key traits to focus on with your staff. Chances are your current employees have many of the qualities necessary for providing excellent customer service. Your goal is to nurture these traits and help employees realize their full potential.

Customer-Service Superstars: The “Recipe” of Important Traits

- **Empathy.** Train your workers to see things from the customer’s perspective and understand his or her unique priorities and needs. This type of empathy will enable staff members to anticipate rather than merely react to customers’ concerns. Nordstrom is famous for its customer service, and part of the reason the company excels is because, as *The Nordstrom Way* explains, “Nordstrom salespeople put themselves in the shoes of their customers.”

- **Long-term perspective.** Encourage your employees to view every transaction as an opportunity to foster a long-term relationship with that customer. Even if a customer’s first experience with your firm is less than perfect (e.g., the customer has a longer wait-time than anticipated), explain to employees how to turn the situation around and lay a solid foundation for an ongoing relationship. For example, the employee should acknowledge the delay, apologize and offer something to make up for it (e.g., “How about some free samples of our new product?” or “Let me give you a coupon for 10 percent off your next purchase.”). Make sure your staff understands they should apply the same long-term investment approach to internal customers and colleagues within the organization.

- **Openness to feedback.** Make it easy for customers to ask questions and give their opinions about the company’s products or services. While a quick fix may not be possible, teach your employees to solicit and act on customer feedback, and provide channels for doing so.

Developing Your Customer-Service Superstars

Teach employees to treat each customer as a unique individual, not like just another undifferentiated member of the crowd. Personalized service makes the customer feel special, important and valued.
• **Responsiveness.** Customer-service superstars over-communicate when responding to customer requests, complaints and concerns. For example, if a product is back-ordered, empower your staff to immediately offer a comparable substitute, or provide the waiting customer with regular updates about the anticipated arrival date and any changes to the order.

• **Customer appreciation.** Implement a variety of ways to thank customers for their business, from a simple verbal “thank you” to VIP programs and special promotions for long-time customers. Use all available methods to actively and consistently let your customers know you value their business and appreciate their loyalty. Solicit ideas from your team and encourage them to come up with creative ways to show customer appreciation.

• **Focus on solutions.** Train your employees to see your company not merely as a manufacturer of goods or a provider of a service, but also as a firm that offers solutions to help your customers achieve their goals. When your staff members see themselves as “solution providers,” they’ll immediately look for ways to offer the kind of attentive, quality service customers deserve.

Do whatever it takes to exceed customer expectations. It goes a long way toward retaining business and creating new opportunities.

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**Customer Service in the Digital Age**

In the digital age, it’s critical to keep tabs on what people are saying about your business.

Thanks to social networking and consumer-review sites, word-of-mouth has attained a new, viral level. A positive aspect of this is that the openness and accessibility of online communication makes it easier than ever to learn what customers think of your firm. Monitor comments (and share them with employees) periodically so you and the team can act on the feedback and nip problems in the bud. Remember that sincerity is paramount – customers can immediately detect a canned, public relations-style response to their concerns, and this may only compound their dissatisfaction with your company.
Training for Service at Every Level

You’ll find that some employees naturally exhibit the preceding qualities, while others need your support and encouragement to develop the traits. Here are some effective ways you can turn every member of your staff into a service superstar:

• **Role-play.** Have employees act out common service situations, such as:
  - First-time client
  - Impatient, angry or dissatisfied customer
  - Client who requires a lot of “hand-holding”
  - Chatty customer
  - Future business prospect (e.g., an individual who is “just browsing” or needs directions)
  - Internal “customer” (e.g., a newly hired coworker who needs help creating a report)

Role-playing is more effective than just providing verbal instructions because it enables your employees to literally stand in the customers’ place and experience the transaction from their point of view. Role-playing also gives employees a chance to practice their service skills and provide one another with instant, constructive feedback in an informal setting.

• **Help them engage in positive dialogue.** Outline helpful phrases that can enable staff to better assist customers. For example, instead of “We’re out of that item,” you might encourage them to say, “I would love to help you with that. The fastest I can have it here is in a week. Will that work for you?” (See Ordinary vs. “Extra Mile” Service, Page 10.)

• **Take a 360-degree approach.** Broaden your scope by asking your staff: “Who isn’t our customer?” Challenge each answer; for example, “The delivery guy isn’t potentially a customer? He meets a lot of people on his routes – isn’t it possible he might one day recommend our business to someone?” As employees list all their “customers,” both internal and external, have them describe what each type needs and how to give them the best service possible. Be sure to point out any “hidden” customers they’ve missed – like their managers, colleagues from other departments in the company (e.g., accounting, sales, IT, marketing) or the other tenants in your office building.

• **Start with the outcome.** Have employees “reverse-engineer” customer service by asking them to work backward from the goal (a satisfied customer) and outline the steps it took to get there. They should include all components – not just interactions on the sales floor or during a phone call or online chat, but also the “back office” steps of product ordering, inventory tracking and quality control, as well as the “inter-team” elements.

“When a customer presents a stressful situation, this is a moment of truth, and you want your employees’ eyes to light up.”

— Eric Gregg, CEO and founder of Inavero, Inc.

Read about his company’s insights on service.
(communication among business units, how the departments supported one another, etc.). This exercise will enable them to identify points at which customer service glitches might occur and brainstorm ways to smooth out those problem areas. Also, it will expand their awareness of all the factors that go into creating a positive experience for customers, and how each employee fits into that team effort.

- **Empower employees to solve problems.** Provide staff with basic company guidelines for handling typical service situations (e.g., refunds, exchanges, returns, billing issues, dissatisfaction with a product, frustration, complaints about quality of product or service), but give them the latitude to lead whenever they can in these areas. They may come up with good ideas, and you’ll give them a vested interest in working to resolve problems and keep customers happy.

- **Create a “Service Hall of Fame.”** Spread best practices by publicizing examples of your employees’ great service in the company newsletter, on a bulletin board in the break room or via the company intranet. Include examples of both service provided internally as well as outside the organization.

- **Reward great service.** Recognize superstars who consistently provide excellent service or exceed company standards. Reward them with spot bonuses, gift cards or extra discounts on your products.

- **Give them the tools they need.** Provide training opportunities for all employees, not simply those who are customer-facing, in conflict resolution, communication, diplomacy, negotiation, active listening and other service-related skills. There are a variety of cost-effective options to choose from, including online courses, webinars, podcasts and seminars.

- **Set the bar.** Exhibit the service-minded behaviors you want to see in your staff. Be courteous, helpful and responsive. Show gratitude and appreciation of others’ efforts and praise their accomplishments. When correcting service mistakes or missteps, avoid blame or criticism. Instead, focus on how employees can improve their methods in the future.

- **Encourage employees to “pay it forward.”** Often, team members become focused on catching and calling attention to one another’s mistakes. To counter this, ask your staff to “catch” one another in acts of kindness and service to each other. They can publicize these moments during staff meetings or via email (e.g., “Kudos to Jason in payroll for helping me solve an issue I was having with direct depositing my paycheck.”).

- **Start a book club.** Purchase books for your team that can help them improve their customer-service skills, and discuss key themes during meetings.

For more information, including tips from customer-service experts and case studies on service, visit our Small and Midsize Business Resource Center.
**Ordinary vs. “Extra Mile” Service**

Help your employees go the extra mile by providing specific examples and wording that can lead to improved care. Following are some examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ordinary</th>
<th>Extra Mile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“How can I help you today?”</td>
<td>“Let me show you our newest ….”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What brings you in?”</td>
<td>“Are you shopping for [holiday]? I'm happy to make some gift suggestions.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I'll have to put you on hold.”</td>
<td>“Would you mind holding? I'll be back in one minute.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Anything else today?”</td>
<td>“Do you need extra batteries or a charger?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I can order it for you.”</td>
<td>“I'll order that and call you when it arrives.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“If we had that, it would be in aisle two.”</td>
<td>“Please follow me – I'll show you where that item is.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“We’re out of that – check our website.”</td>
<td>“Let me check our other locations.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I'm not authorized to give you a refund.”</td>
<td>“I'll get my manager to assist you.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I don't know when it will be in stock.”</td>
<td>“I'll get that to you ASAP!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“We'll need a little more time for that.”</td>
<td>“We want to make sure you get the best possible product. How would you feel if we moved that deadline out a week?”</td>
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</table>
Conclusion

All customers want personalized attention, and smaller businesses often have a leg up on larger firms when it comes to service: You can devote significant attention to each hire and swiftly implement best practices that can improve service levels. By setting high standards, recruiting customer-service superstars and empowering your employees to go the extra mile, you’ll build a reputation as a company that genuinely cares about its customers. These efforts will be repaid in increased loyalty, favorable word-of-mouth reviews and new business.

This guide is the second in The Robert Half Small and Midsize Business Series. The series is designed to provide business leaders with ideas and insights that can help them increase productivity and profits. For more advice and research, we invite you to visit our Small and Midsize Business Resource Center at roberthalf.com/smallbusinesscenter. You also can find us on Twitter: @smallbizhiring. For help with any of your staffing needs, please visit our website at roberthalf.com or call 1.800.803.8367 for the office nearest you.
About Robert Half

Founded in 1948, Robert Half is the world’s first and largest specialized staffing firm, with more than 345 offices worldwide. The company’s professional staffing divisions include Accountemps®, Robert Half® Finance & Accounting and Robert Half® Management Resources, for temporary, full-time and senior-level project professionals, respectively, in the fields of accounting and finance; OfficeTeam®, for highly skilled office and administrative support professionals; Robert Half® Technology, for project and full-time technology professionals; Robert Half® Legal, for project and full-time staffing of lawyers, paralegals and legal support personnel; and The Creative Group®, for creative, advertising, marketing, web and public relations professionals. For more information about the specialized staffing and recruitment divisions of Robert Half, visit roberthalf.com.