

**FAQ (5) How can we encourage better customer service from our downtown businesses?**

Customer service is the central focus, which governs many successful businesses. It is more than just a way that staff deals with the public, but for many organizations it is a basic philosophy, which governs every aspect of their business.

Many downtown businesses tend to be smaller, independent businesses who may lack the ability to compete effectively with national or regional chains that may have healthy advertising budgets. In this case, the downtown businesses will have to offer reasons for shoppers and tourists to patronize them as opposed to suburban shopping locations. One way of differentiating downtown businesses is to encourage them to offer exceptional customer service. Quite apart from competing with suburban locations, improved customer service is likely to provide a worthwhile payback in the form of increased customer loyalty and sales.

It is interesting that the book, *Up Against the Wal-Marts: How Your Business Can Prosper in the Shadow of the Retail Giants*, American Management Association, 1994, by Don Taylor and Jeanne Smalling Archer, identifies ten survival strategies, the pre-eminent one being, "Focus completely on satisfying the customers".

In their book, Taylor and Archer identify three customer laws:

1. Customers always go where they get good value.
2. Customers always go where they are treated well.
3. Where the value isn't obvious or when the level of service slips, the customer slips away.

Downtown businesses or businesses in smaller communities would benefit from focusing clearly on improving their understanding and knowledge of customer needs. Further, they must meet customer needs including providing exemplary customer service. Much has been written on customer relationship management and customer service. Some of these techniques are quite sophisticated, and incorporate practices such as researching customer needs, understanding customer demographics and profiles, and communicating with and servicing customers. Ultimately, they depend on developing an in-depth understanding of

what customers want, why they shop where they do and providing superior customer service to meet their needs.

For example, Taylor and Archer recommend that businesses need to:

- Understand the customer laws outlined above
- Get acquainted with your customer, particularly through personal contact
- Identify a target customer by use of demographics such as age, sex, income level, location of residence and buying habits
- Know **what** your customer wants to buy
- Know **why** your customer wants to buy
- Know **when** your customer wants to buy
- Know **where** people like to shop
- Study the competition
- Learn from your peers
- Gather good ideas from everyone

### Characteristics of Customer Service Focus

Customer service is more than simply "smile training". There are many successful companies that have made a deep commitment to providing outstanding customer service. They have adopted the following basic principles:

- Service awareness is the top priority for every employee in the organization.
- Staff members listen and respond to the constantly evolving needs and expectations of customers.
- A clear definition of "service" is developed and communicated to employees at every level.
- Standards of excellence are established and adhered to.
- The organization has a clear commitment to employee training and invests considerable resources in it.
- The organization encourages feedback from customers: it regards complaints as an opportunity to improve service, rather than a negative aspect of business.

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The basic elements of a customer service training session will include topics such as the following:

- Basics of customer service
- Service culture and attitude
- Use of correct language
- Deportment and grooming
- Product knowledge
- Telephone skills
- Understanding customer needs
- Interactive and communications skills
- Rules for better expressing
- Rules for better listening
- Non-verbal communication
- Handling difficult situations
- Conflict resolution

The types of training techniques would ideally include some combination of:

- Presentation on basic principles
- Group discussions and team building exercises
- Role plays and conflict simulations
- Personal growth
- Access to further resources for interested participants

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## Identifying a Trainer

There are several good information sources on customer service training for this type of workshop session. These include:

- [Ontario Society for Training and Development](#) (A list of trainers)
- [Superhost program](#) (A list of this and other service training programs)
- [Your local Community College](#)
- [Human Resources and Skills Development Canada regional office](#)

## Benefits of a Coordinated Approach to Upgrading Customer Service

Clearly, downtown businesses will need to buy into the idea that they collectively have a need to improve their customer service before they are likely to take any serious action to improve it. Although there may well be many businesses who may have excellent customer relationships, there are undoubtedly those, which could improve these skills. There is also cause for the downtown to collectively agree that it should work better to improve customer service rather than leaving it up to the individual business owners. This approach can be used to help attract shoppers away from other locations. It could also be used as part of the downtown areas branding concept discussed above.

Customer service will also be clearly of importance for any shopping or tourist information function, which the community wishes to provide.

The Los Angeles Downtown Business Improvement District has taken the idea of customer service one step further. To ensure that the City Centre is safe and clean, the BID has instituted a "Purple Patrol – a team of maintenance, safety and customer service guides to augment City services.

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Technical inquiries to: [redi.omafr@ontario.ca](mailto:redi.omafr@ontario.ca)

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