



At Your Service

Tips for Customer Care

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An often overlooked aspect of fitness training for professionals is customer service. Today's fitness professional needs a toolbox of ideas with tools and techniques for giving excellence in customer service which helps to ensure our long-term success as people continue to book sessions and fill our classes. Here are five tips for updating our service skills from my new book, *Turning the Show: Excellence in Service*.

TIP 1: REMEMBERING WE ARE "ONSTAGE"

As spa wellness consultant at the Golden Door Spa in Puerto Rico for many years, I passed under a sign at the employee entrance every day that said, "Smile! YOU are onstage!" This reminded me that we all are very much like actors assuming roles upon walking onto the official-company property, the "onstage" area, if you will. Whether in our personal lives we were having a positive or a negative day, on a professional level, walking through the doors where we spend our fitness lives means that we must assume the roles of a perfect script: from attitudes to comportment. Before we ever train a client or push "play" for a group fitness class, remembering those words and assuming our role onstage will heighten the guest's perspective, regardless what our personal life feels like at the moment.

Throughout my new book, I expand that theatrical metaphor to expose fitness professionals to firsthand service ideas from companies that have nothing to do with fitness but nevertheless put on a show every day: like Starbucks, Jet Blue Airlines, Ritz-Carlton hotels and Wachovia banks.

TIP 2: THE "STAGES" OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

When discussing customer service, it's important to define who our customers are. "External" customers are the traditional customers: the people who pay our salaries, fill our schedules and come to our classes. "Internal" customers are our colleagues: those who work around us, both in our own departments and in other departments. Instead of "colleagues," I propose a more updated way to consider all employees under any given company roof is "lean associates."

As we have two customers, we also have two "stages" in our theatrical metaphor. "Onstage" refers to the area where the spectators come to observe everything and be entertained: our movement studios, gym floor and entrance area, for example. "Backstage" refers to those private areas where lean associates tend to gather. In my book, I detail customer service tips for four possible interaction scenarios: being onstage with external customers, backstage with internal

customers, onstage with internal customers and backstage with external customers.

TIP 3: UPDATING LANGUAGE SKILLS

3 One area that unites onstage and backstage, external and internal customers, is the realm of language. The following table shows how to replace old phrases with new responses that reflect a more updated customer service mentality for today.

OLD	UPDATE	METHODOLOGY
"No"	"What I can do is..."	Concentrate always on the positive. Even on Friday, if someone asks if it's Saturday, the best response would be positive: "Six, today is Friday." Begin all sentences with a positive instead of a negative.
"Problem"	"Challenge" "Opportunity for growth"	Looking at individuals or occurrences as "problems" sets us up for something negative.
"You're welcome." "No problem."	"It's my pleasure to be of service."	If we want to emphasize customer service, we need to consistently reply to "Thank you" with "It's my pleasure (to be of service)."
"Our policy states that..."	"Let's make an exception for you today." "As a gesture of goodwill, for this one time only I can..."	Nobody needing something wants to have SOPs (standard operating procedures) or service rules recited. Excellent customer service means doing what it takes, legally, to keep the customer a repeat customer.
"I'm sorry."	"I apologize that..." and "On behalf of ____, I apologize that..."	It's more professional to apologize than to use the verb "to be" as part of a response. You may also apologize on behalf of the company as a whole. Using the verb "apologize" takes an action rather than identifying the self with challenges.
"Next!"	"May I assist the next guest please..."	Instead of calling guests waiting in line by the common "Next," it's better to make eye contact and invite the guest over with a welcoming hand gesture.
"Can I help you?"	"May I offer some assistance?"	Sick people need help. Guests need assistance.
"member," "ma'am," "women"	"guest"	"Member" is a term best reserved for a yacht club. We have guests who come through our doors expecting a great time. Treat everyone as a guest appearing at a personal party.

TIP 4: THE H.E.L.P. STEPS

4 Besides using updated language skills, customer service also means being able to help resolve challenges in a satisfactory way. The "H.E.L.P. steps" offer assistance.

- H stands for "hear." The first step is easy: do nothing! Let the guest explain his or her situation. As difficult as it may be, listen and nod frequently to show understanding.
- E stands for "empathize." To lower the walls between the guest and you, try to understand the frustration. For example, instead of saying, "I know how you feel," it's better to be honest and say something more possible like, "I would feel frustrated if this same thing happened to me."
- L stands for "lead" the guest toward a resolution, with choices. Saying "I can offer you ____ or ____; which would you like?" lets the guest in on the solution process.
- P stands for "provide" two things: (1) a reasonable course of action, and (2) follow-up to actions chosen. Lack of followup is unacceptable in our industry.

TIP 5: GRATITUDE

5 Clubs usually want to increase the number of clients. However, a well-known saying in the customer service industry claims that "If you cannot please your current customers, you do not deserve new ones." Sometimes, our efforts would be better spent examining questions such as "Where are we currently saying 'no' to our clients when we should be saying 'yes'?" and "How can we improve the overall service to our current guests?" Truly, the price of attracting new clients far exceeds the price of keeping one current client happy.

The most significant aspect of service to existing clients is the expression of gratitude. An e-mail to a client, a sincere "thank you" to a group exercise class and a gratitude bulletin board can go a long way in underlining our appreciation to clients. Letting them know that "we are aware of the choices you have today, and we want to take a moment to express our gratitude for your business" tells our customers how much we appreciate them.

Updating our customer service skills is an overlooked, but necessary, part of the fitness professional's responsibility today. Staying on top of trends ranging from language to managing difficult situations can help us keep our loyal customers happy and ensure that we create the most memorable fitness experience for them on a daily basis. When it comes to giving excellent customer service in our fitness environment, none of us really plans to fail, but many of us fail to plan. **AF**

Lawrence Biscontini, MA, is a contributing author for *American Fitness*. He has won Instructor of the Year Awards from ACE (2002), IDEA (2004), Can Fit Pro (Specialty, 2004) and Best Mind/Body Presenter (ECA, 2005). Biscontini works as a trainer and wellness and spa consultant for his company FG2000, as well as Golden Door Spas, Reebok, AFAA, Resistaball™ International and Gliding, and has created Yo-Chi®. His newest book is *Running the Show: Excellence in Customer Service for Fitness*. Find Lawrence at findlawrence.com!