

Customer Service Ethics

Many companies develop ethical codes. These are the broad sets of beliefs that drive the companies' actions, including how business decisions are made, how employees are treated, how they expand in new markets and how they interact with the consumer market. Often, companies develop separate codes of ethics for each of these categories because they each require unique ethical considerations. For example, the ethics used to develop strategies for improving employee engagement are different from those relied upon when making decisions regarding the development of new marketing strategies.

Customer Ethics Definition

Generally, customer ethics are defined as a set of ethics that service providers follow to ensure that they treat their customers with respect. Often, non-discrimination is one of these ethics and as such, it guarantees that every customer is treated with respect regardless of her age, religious or cultural background, race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class or history with the company.

Other customer ethics include valuing the relationship with the customer over the sale and keeping meticulous records of all customer interactions to reduce the chance of employee errors causing problems for customers. Valuing the relationship with the customer over making a sale often means taking any step necessary to correct a customer's problem, even when it means the company does not profit from the transaction that led to the problem.

Developing a Customer Service Code of Ethics

Before a company can develop a customer service code of ethics, its leaders need to identify their ethical viewpoints for the company and how these can translate into a code of ethics.

A customer service code of ethics is not the same as a customer service code of conduct; while a code of conduct is a set of specific guidelines employees are to follow at work and, in some cases, outside the workplace, a code of ethics is a set of morals and beliefs that the company strives to operate by. Generally, a code of ethics is the basis for a code of conduct, and the code of conduct may reference the code of ethics at numerous points.

Common ethical values companies work into their customer service codes of ethics are:

- Honesty
- Responsiveness
- Transparency
- Respect
- Value
- Loyalty

- A drive to solve problems

A code of ethics is not just a vague list of values like these. It is a set of statements that spell out how these values drive the company's actions. These statements are the policies that make up the code of ethics and should be made readily available to employees. Often, a customer service code of ethics and all other company ethics policies are included in its employee handbook.

Putting Ethics into Action

Creating a code of conduct for employees working in customer service is one way for a company's leaders to put their code of ethics into action, but this is not the only way. Other ways to act according to the customer service ethics they have identified include:

- Making sure customers get the best deal by honoring competitors' coupons
- Believing all customer claims, even those that seem exaggerated or fabricated
- Publishing information about how the company sources its materials
- Connecting all customer service callers directly to human representatives, rather than a robo-menu
- Rewarding loyal customers with discounts, price lock-ins and special promotions
- Resolving every customer problem that arises, even those that were not the company or its products' fault
- Tailoring the type of service each customer receives to his unique needs
- Discussing products and services in honest terms, rather than trying to upsell and oversell them
- Advertising honest promotions and prices and avoiding "bait and switch" advertising tactics
- Complying with consumer protection laws
- Thoroughly testing all products before they reach the market and issuing prompt recalls for every released product found to be defective
- Using customers' names and terms like "sir" and "madam" when interacting with them
- Responding to all customer inquiries promptly
- Honestly assessing customers' challenges and recommending the best solutions for them, rather than the solutions that will be the most profitable for the company
- Never sharing customers' personal data without their consent

An ethical stance that feels right for one company might not work for another. For some brands, accepting all customer returns without question is the most ethical stance to take because the company's goal is to make every customer happy. For other brands, setting firm, yet fair, limits on acceptable returns is a way to foster two-way respect between the brand and its customers and keep the company from facing financial and inventory challenges related to an excess of returned items. Typically, the ideal ethical stances for a brand are determined by its industry and its position within the industry.

Can Ethical Behavior Be Taught?

Ethical behavior in customer service can be taught. In fact, it *must* be taught to employees to ensure that beyond knowing their employer's ethical stances, they understand *why* their employer holds these ethics and how they are expected to lean on these ethics in the course of their daily job duties.

Even when an employee has had customer service training at a previous job, it is important for him to become familiar with his current employer's ethical standards. These may be different from his former employers' ethical codes, and training him to interact with customers according to his employer's ethical code can prevent him from making mistakes.

Training Ethical Behavior in Customer Service

There are a variety of ways an employer can train employees in customer service ethics. Many of these strategies are games and collaborative activities like role playing customer service scenarios and having group discussions about the current state of customer service at the company.

One way to engage employees in a discussion about customer service ethics is to ask them about their own experiences with customer service representatives and how they, themselves, would like to be treated when they are in the customer's position. Another is to implement a customer feedback system and offer incentives for employees who score well according to this system.

Another way companies can improve the service their customers receive is to maintain high ethical standards for employee treatment. When employees feel respected at work, they are more likely to take their work seriously and engage positively with the customers they serve. Paying fair wages, offering workplace perks like short-term leave benefits and paid vacation time and cultivating a workplace culture that makes employees feel valued can drive them to do their best at work. In a customer service role, an employee doing her best means delivering the highest quality customer service possible.

Ethical Behavior in Customer Service Pays Off

Developing a customer service code of ethics and abiding by it does not just give employees a set of guidelines to follow when interacting with customers; it sets the tone for each customer's relationship with the company. A customer who feels she is valued by the companies she supports will remain a loyal customer for years, potentially even decades. Loyal customers often speak well of the companies they support online and in-person and advise their friends and loved ones to support those companies as well. For many companies, developing an effective set of customer service ethics is an investment in future earnings and growth.