

Module 7

Customer Service

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Customer Service

Whether your career path takes you into organizations that manufacture goods, sells goods, or provides services, these organizations all have customers. If you have direct contact with the customers your employer serves, you have tremendous influence toward making a very successful business - or to move the business down the path of ruin! Likewise, good customers service skills and attitudes can be a tremendous asset for your career success. In this module, you will learn more about the value of customer service to an organization's success and see some practical skills you can practice to raise your ability to provide outstanding customer service.

Objectives

When you complete this module, you will be able to...

1. Give reasons for making customer service a high priority.
2. Identify routine practices and skills associated with quality customer service.
3. Use a plan for handling customer complaints.
4. Face angry customers with increased confidence.
5. Identify issues a business must face in order to provide excellent customer service.

1. The Value of Customer Service to Your Organization

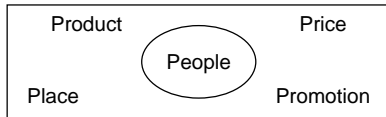
Focus Question:

Why do some businesses put so much emphasis on customer service?
Why should I pay attention to my own customer service skills and attitudes?

In the introductory paragraph, we suggested that a business's success or failure could ride on the quality of customer service it provides. Is this an exaggerated claim? Let's take a closer look at the issues involved.

Customer Choice

In today's global economy, it is very rare to find a business that is truly unique—that is, a business that is the one and only provider of a particular item or kind of service. Customers have choices. They decide to go to your business based on a number of factors:



The consumer considers these:

- Do they have the item or service I want? (Product)
- Is it at an agreeable price? (Price)
- Is the location of the business reasonably convenient? (Place)
- Is there advertising that has drawn my attention to this business? (Promotion)
- How do the staff treat me at the business? (People)

Why did we put People in the center of the diagram? Because this is the area – customer service – in which a business may have the greatest opportunity to distinguish itself from the competition. Customer service is one key to a business’ success.

Costs or Retaining Customers vs. Recruiting New Customers

I used to go to Frank & Ernest Bike shop when I needed tires or inner tubes or brake pads for my bicycle. It was one of the closest bike shops to home, and their prices were OK for the things I need to keep my commute bike rolling smoothly. (“Product, Price, Place.”) Then my bike developed a strange noise, a kind of a clank when I turned the pedals. I took it to Frank and Ernest, suggesting it needed a bottom bracket replaced. The manager agreed with my assessment. “I need the bike for my commute on Monday. Can you get it done over the weekend?” I asked. The manager assured me it would be done.

I returned to pick up my bike on Sunday an hour before closing. They hadn’t started working on it yet. I waited in the shop until an hour after closing for them to do the job. While working on my bike, the manager and the mechanic both made jabs about the age of my bike, how I was foolish maintaining this bike, how I’d be happier if I let go of sentimentality and got a new bike. When the job was done, I paid them, thanked them for staying late, and left, having decided not to do business with them again. Frank and Ernest had lost a customer.

If this bike shop is like an average business, the manager’s and mechanic’s sarcastic and demeaning remarks cost the shop \$118.85. That is the cost a business typically incurs in order to attract one new customer. Customer service - how staff treat people - makes a bottom-line difference for a business.

Internal and External Customers

When you walk into a store, shop, or office as a customer, someone will usually attend to you, the customer. That person who serves you is often not alone. Behind that person is a web of other relationships within the business, a network of people who have contributed to making the person attending to you able to do her job.

For example, as a patient entering an exam room in a medical office, you as patient are a “customer” of the business, the medical practice. Let’s distinguish you as an **external customer**. Before you arrive at the office, a front office assistant pulls your chart so that it is ready for her **internal customer**, the back office medical assistant. The medical assistant provides you service by taking vital signs, asking about symptoms, and so on. The medical assistant records this information and provides it to another of his customers, a physician. The physician treats you, and then passes your file to one of her internal customers in the billing department.

A “customer” is someone who depends on others to receive the goods, services or information that enables them to meet their goals. This chain of internal customer service in the medical office example can be summarized like this:

Position	...Is a Customer Of...	Serves This Customer...
Front Office		Medical Assistants
Medical Assistant	Front Office	Physician
Physician	Medical Assistant	Medical Biller
Medical Biller	Physician	

If there is poor service at any point in this chain of internal customers, the external customer is likely to feel it. For example, if the physician does not clearly and accurately record services, the medical biller cannot properly invoice the patient or insurance. What irritates a customer more than an inaccurate bill?

So the skills of customer service will make a bottom-line business difference even for employees who do not have direct contact with the public. The level of service employees give the internal customer controls the level of service employees give the external customer.

Reflection

Think about your current job or a previous job. In that job, who are your various internal and external customers?

Comprehension Question:

- 1. Which of these are reasons for emphasizing customer service?
 - A. It costs more to keep a customer happy than to recruit a new customer.
 - B. Focusing on the "internal customer" makes a business work less efficiently.
 - C. Good customer service is the least important factor when people decide where to do business.
 - D. A, B, and C.
 - E. None of the above.

Answer:

1-E. See Discussion of Quiz, pp. 32-34.

Case Study

Nate worked in a floral shop making floral arrangements and waiting on customers. Nate received this written evaluation from his supervisor:

Nate does very fine work in his arrangements, taking enough time to get them right, but never working slowly. He wisely selects the best flowers for each part of an arrangement, so very few supplies are wasted.

When customers come into the shop, they seem to have difficulty getting help from Nate, because he is so focused on the arrangements. He often taps his fingers while customers are making decisions. Nate has even argued with customers about their decisions.

I will be working with Nate on a performance improvement plan for the coming month. If Nate does not improve the way he treats customers, he will be dismissed from employment in this shop.

How important is good customer service to the floral shop manager?

2. Interacting with Customers

Focus Question:

What are the essential skills required of a customer service provider?

Recall the diagram above depicting reasons why customers choose a particular business. At the center of the diagram: People. In this section we will look at the people skills – basic customer service skills – that help the organization you work for have a quality edge over others.

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is the interaction between what customers *expect* and what they *perceive* in their contact with an organization. First let's

examine the expectations of customers. Then we'll discuss how to ensure their perceptions of your organization meet or exceed their expectations.

We find one summary of customer expectations in the acronym RATER:

Reliability	The ability to supply what was promised, reliably and dependably.
Assurance	The knowledge and ability of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence.
Tangibles	The physical building and appearances, the appearance of employees.
Empathy	The degree of individual caring and attention provided to customers.
Responsiveness	The willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.

Adapted from *Marketing Services: Competing Through Quality* by Berry and Parasuraman. Appearing in *Superior Customer Service* by Stull and Crow. Much of this presentation is adapted from Stull and Crow.

Let's think again about the Frank and Ernest Bike Shop. Where did they fail to meet my expectations?

Reliability – I expected my bike to be ready at the end of the day Sunday. Though they partially recovered from this failure by getting started on my bike right away when I came in (Responsiveness), they failed to meet my expectations for Reliability.

Empathy – I expect human respect from a business, but I felt ridiculed by the manager and mechanic. While I might forgive an error in scheduling work, as a customer I could find no excuse for such treatment.

Let's look again at the RATER scheme to see what you as worker can take responsibility to do to ensure your organization meets or exceeds customer expectations.

Reliability	The ability to supply what was promised, reliably and dependably. Communicate clearly and honestly to create appropriate expectations about the performance of goods and services. Ask a co-worker if questions come up you don't know the answers to. If any delay is foreseen in delivery of a product or service, notify the customer.
Assurance	The knowledge and ability of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence. Learn all you can about your company's products and services so that you can explain them well. This includes the limitations of products and

	services and how they might compare with other products and services available elsewhere.
Tangibles	The physical building and appearances, the appearance of employees. Take responsibility to pick up that piece of trash on the floor in public view, even if “it’s not your job.” Keep your own work area neat. Conform to your organizations standards for employees’ dress and grooming.
Empathy	The degree of individual caring and attention provided to customers. Listen to the customers. “Blend” with the customers. (Blending is described below.)
Responsiveness	The willingness to help customers and provide prompt service. Make eye contact, even if you have another customer on the phone. Take initiative to greet customers, offering assistance. Respond quickly to requests.

Later in this module, we will discuss methods for getting a better understanding of your customers.

Comprehension Questions:

2. T F It is usually best not to say anything about the products and services sold by your competitors.

3. T F If the customer asks a question you don’t know the answer to, it is better to make something up than to look uninformed.

Answers:
2-F; 3-F. See Discussion of Quiz, pp. 32-34.

Basic Dos and Don’ts of Customer Service

These are essential practices for interacting with internal and external customers.

Do

1. Greet the customer.
2. Make eye contact and smile.
3. Respond quickly to a question or request.
4. Be quick to follow through.
5. Anticipate customer needs.
6. Provide options when a problem arises.
7. Take responsibility for your actions.
8. Be on the customer’s side.
9. Go the extra mile.

Don’t

1. Be rude or ill-mannered.
2. Argue with a customer.
3. Complain about your supervisor or other employees.
4. Be unresponsive to requests.
5. Say “We can’t do that” or “We don’t do that.”

We will look more closely at some of these in the following discussions of responsiveness, listening skills, promoting a positive image, and giving service over the phone.

Responsiveness

To excel in providing customer service, you must cultivate the practice of “noticing-and-acting.” However deeply you must concentrate on other tasks, you must notice when someone enters your work area and act, greeting the person (Do-1). Noticing and acting communicates to the customer you care, meeting the customer’s expectation for empathy.

Another dimension of responsiveness is demonstrated when customer service providers find creative solutions to meet a customer’s needs. Compare these two dialogs:

<p>I Customer: I’d like to apply the balance on my account toward the \$200 deposit I need to put down for water & power service at my new apartment. Customer Service Rep: You can’t do that. Customer: What? Rep: It’s against policy. Customer: That seems crazy. You already have my money in hand. Rep: Sorry, sir.</p>	<p>II Customer: I’d like to apply the balance on my account to the deposit I need to put down for water & power service at my new apartment. Customer Service Rep: You’re concerned with your cash flow? Customer: Yes. Rep: How about this: I can make sure that accounting sends out your refund check right away. You should receive it in the mail in two days. Will that work for you? Customer: That’ll be fine, if I can get it by Wednesday.</p>
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In Dialog I, The Customer Service Rep comes, in her unresponsiveness to the request (Don’t-4 and Don’t-5), comes off almost as rude (Don’t-1). In Dialog II, the Customer Service Rep identified the customer need and responded to it, providing a new option (Do-6).

Of course if the Customer Service Rep in Dialog II can’t really make sure that the check goes out today, the Rep is creating a bigger customer

service problem. Never promise what you can't deliver on. If an unforeseen twist happens so that you cannot deliver on your promise, contact the customer immediately to explain the situation. Suppose the key person in the Accounting office is out sick today. The Rep didn't know that when she spoke to the Customer. But the Rep still takes responsibility for the new problem (Do-7) because in the Customer's eyes, the Rep *should* take responsibility.

When the Rep phones the customer to describe and apologize for the new problem (the delayed check), she again provides alternatives responsive to the customer's real concerns.

A Nordstrom employee describes a practice that demonstrates tremendous responsiveness to the customer. The employee tells how in the back room at Nordstrom's they keep a phone directory of the other stores in the mall where the Nordstrom store is located. If a customer asks for an item that Nordstrom's does not have in stock but the service provider believes may be at another store in the mall, the service provider phones the other store to ask if the item is available there. That is "extra mile" service (Do-0). When my father-in-law was ill and needed a rare prescription, the pharmacy technician in the grocery store phoned several other pharmacies in town to help me find the needed medication. I couldn't thank her enough for that Nordstrom-style extra mile service.

Comprehension Questions:

4. Which of these sets of actions demonstrates responsiveness to the customer?
- A. Greeting the customer, answering customer questions, arguing with the customer.
 - B. Suggesting which store carries the item the customer seeks, waiting for the customer to ask questions, pausing a long time before moving to assist a customer.
 - C. Finding out the need or interest behind the customer's question, presenting various options, shaking the customer's hand.
 - D. Suggesting which store carries the item the customer seeks, greeting the customer, answering customer questions.

Answer:

4-D. See Discussion of Quiz, pp. 32-34.

Listening

The customer has come to your organization to meet some need. You won't be able to meet that customer's need if you don't know what the need is. You won't know precisely what that need is unless you listen to the customer. Here are some tips for effective listening.

1. **Look at the customer.** It is hard to believe someone is listening to me if they are not looking at me. The customer wants to know you are listening.

2. **Blend.** Blending is the use of any behavior which reduces the difference between you and the other. Blending establishes common ground and increases trust and rapport.

Blending in speech will mean...

When addressing those who speak rapidly, speak rapidly.

When addressing those who speak slowly speak slowly.

When addressing those who speak softly, speak softly.

When addressing those who speak loudly, speak loudly.

3. **Make sounds of acknowledgement.** These sounds might be anything from "Hmm," "Uh-huh," "Wow" to repeating a word or phrase the other has said. The longer the customer takes to explain her situation, the more important it is to let her know you are following her.

4. **Ask clarifying questions.** If the customer said some things that are hard to follow, ask the classic questions to get the information about this person's problem: **Who**, did **What**, **Where**, to **Whom**, **How**? It can save you and the customer time to ask for clarification, rather than you presenting options of products or services that are irrelevant to the customer's interests. Asking questions does not make you look stupid. On the contrary, asking questions demonstrates that you understand your field well enough to know exactly what information will make a difference in the customer getting what she needs. The customer is more likely to believe you are on her side (Do-8).

Comprehension Questions:

5. T F Listening is the process of discovering the customer's needs.

6. T F Speaking softly with those who speak loudly is one small way to build trust with that other person.

Answers:

5-T; 6-F. See Discussion of Quiz, pp. 32-34.

Positive Image

The Physical Environment

You might spend forty hours a week there and come not to notice the clutter any more. Your customer will notice if things appear disorderly or dirty. Whether or not you think it is fair, the public will make judgments

about your organization based on such appearances. Part of what has made Starbuck's Coffee so successful is that their bathrooms are reliably clean.

At the very least, you can take responsibility for your own work area—making sure it is neat and clean. Next, do the same with common areas or public areas at your workplace. Take responsibility and just do it. Make an area look better from a customer-eye point of view.

You

If customers make judgments about your organization based on the physical environment, they will make even stronger judgments based on the appearance of those who work there. This is why some companies have dress codes or uniforms and policies related to tattoos, rings and pairings and facial hair. Once again, this may not seem fair, but is the way things are.

Presenting a positive image of yourself also entails your speech and posture. Picture the retail clerk who paces slowly through the store with hands in pockets and eyes aimed down at his feet. Contrast that look with the ready-to-serve position of hands out of pockets, head up and looking around the store. It is not enough to *be* ready to help customers. You have to *look* ready to help as well.

Enthusiasm helps projects a positive image. We are extremely diverse as human beings and though two of us might internally feel the same level of enthusiasm inwardly toward an idea or activity, from the outside, one might look super excited while the other appeared in blahs-ville. The temperaments are different, though the enthusiasm might be the same. If your tendency is to be more subdued, less expressive, you can learn to appear more enthusiastic.

- **Voice:** Variation in pitch, volume and speed will appear as signs of enthusiasm.
- **Movement:** Using gestures and moving with a feeling of energy will usually be interpreted as enthusiasm.

This is not a matter of faking it or being untrue to yourself. This is a matter of putting your best foot forward to make a good impression for the customer.

Co-worker Relationships

You will not set a positive image by blaming your manager or colleague for a problem. In the eyes of the customer interacting with you, you represent the entire organization. Therefore it is unreasonable to the customer for you to blame something on “management” or “the other

department.” Do not pass the buck in front of the customer. There are times when someone else will be able to serve the customer more effectively. In a face-to-face setting, excellent service is to take the customer to your colleague, introducing her and summarizing her situation. Over the phone I have felt the best served when the employee who must transfer me stays on the line to make sure the third person picks up the phone, then introduces me and explains my situation.

On the other hand, suppose you have great rapport with your co-workers. Another way to taint your image in the customer's eyes is to engage in a private or non-business conversation in earshot of the customer. From the customer's viewpoint, sure, it's fine you have friends at work, and it's great you can converse during some less demanding tasks or while on your break. But you present a very unprofessional image when I hear you talk among yourselves about a party, a hunting trip, your new car.

Comprehension Question:

7. Which of these helps present a positive image to the customer?
- Telling how often your supervisor makes the same mistakes.
 - Varying the pitch, volume and speed of your speech.
 - Keeping your work area organized.
 - Letting the customer hear your conversations with co-workers about matters not related to work.
- A. I, II, III, IV
B. I, II, III
C. II, III
D. II, III, IV

Answer:
7-C. See Discussion of Quiz, pp. 32-34.

On the Phone

There are special challenges to communicating over the phone. In person, you have a whole tool kit of meaningful movements you can make and visual cues you can receive. Over the phone your tools are limited to the medium of the voice.

Answer the Phone.

Answer the phone with a smile on your face. The customer will hear you smiling. If this does not seem true, try this experiment. Position yourself back-to-back with a friend and answer the phone as you do at work. Pretend to answer the phone with a straight face some of the time; other times pretend to answer with a smile. Have your friend guess each time whether or not you are smiling.

One of the most annoying experiences for the customer is to dial a phone that seems never to get answered. Pick it up. Your company may have a

phone system that rolls through an advertisement while callers are on hold. Fine, but think about it: you have a customer that has called you. What better way to keep a customer than to provide prompt quality service. Answer the phone.

Of course, the other phone-related annoyance is when the customer in-person has been interrupted by the service provider answering the phone. Customer service consultants agree. The customer in-person should get first priority. Excuse yourself from the in-person customer. Answer the phone: “Good afternoon. [business name]. I’m serving another customer. May I put you on hold please?” This is music to the ears of the in-person customer. And it is usually highly respected by the calling customer.

Confirm Messages.

In person, you demonstrate to the customer that you are listening by looking at her, nodding, and verbalizing “uh-huh,” repeating back a word or idea. Over the phone you have only those verbalizations. They become extremely valuable and must be used more often on the phone than face to face. Be aware of this and on the phone be generous with your “Yes, uh-huh, I see,” repetitions and re-phrasings of the customer’s statements.

If you find yourself doing lots of telephone work, you will want to become a master at using your voice. Consider how varying speed, pitch and volume and using pauses can help increase your voice power for communicating. At the same time, even though the customer can’t see you, continue to use gestures when talking on the phone. These subtly influence your speech and so, to a degree, can be “heard,” sometimes as clearly as your smile.

Comprehension Question:

8. Which of these is recommended for providing customer service over the phone?
- A. Gesture and smile on the phone, just as you would in talking to someone in person.
 - B. Be silent while the other person is talking.
 - C. When dealing with a face-to-face customer, you should not answer the phone.
 - D. The customer is always right.

Answer:

8-A. See Discussion of Quiz, pp. 32-34.

3. Handling Customer Complaints

Focus Questions:

How can complaints be an asset to a business?
What steps should I follow in resolving a complaint?
How should I adjust the complaint resolution process in encounters with particular kinds of complainers?

Customers who complain are a great gift to your business. Welcome the complaint with open arms!

I’m not saying I enjoy being griped at by customers. But here is what studies of customer dissatisfaction tell us: Of all the people who are unhappy with service at a business, only one out of about twenty unhappy people will complain. Each of the nineteen or so will tell four or more people about the poor experience they had at your business. Some of the nineteen will be lost customers who never return to your business. On the other hand, if you can bring prompt resolution to the problem of the one complainer, that person is likely to tell ten people about his positive experience with you and is ore likely to remain a loyal customer.

One complaint gives you opportunity to

- Earn a devoted customer
- Earn ten positive “word of mouth” events
- Improve your products and services based on information you get from the complaint.

So welcome, invite, encourage the complaints, as they contribute to the success of your organization. Welcome complaints, and become effective at dealing with them.

“Making It Right” for the Customer

It was lunch time on this special day when my 3-year-old son and I were in Children’s Fairyland, a small scale amusement park in Oakland. We walked to the food area and ordered a couple hot dogs. When the clerk counted out change, it didn’t seem quite the right amount. “I think I gave you a twenty,” I said, “not a ten.” The manager came over in a moment, and as she said, “You look like someone who comes here often,” she pulled a \$10 bill from the cash register and handed it to me. I thanked her. I was impressed with the hassle-free, customer-is-right quick resolution.

Later, as I reflected on the manager’ actions, I concluded she knew Fairyland is about having a good time. A dissatisfied customer, one who had an argument with staff over a measly ten dollars, might never return, and would surely tell others about “being ripped off by Fairyland.” Giving me ten dollars was in line with the mission of Fairyland and cost effective as public relations. (As I ate my hot dog, I also rehearsed everything I could remember about what bills I had in my wallet and what I had spent money on in the last few days. I concluded that I had broken the twenty dollar bill earlier and that it was actually a ten dollar bill I had given the clerk at the hot dog stand. Before leaving the food area I returned the ten

that the manager had given me. I'm sure I would never have returned it if I had fought for it!

Basic Complaint Action Plan

Give customers your full and undivided attention.

Look at the customer with open body language (Not hands on hips or arms folded across chest).

Listen completely.

Follow the suggestions provided above for listening: blending, acknowledgement ("I see"), and clarification questions. In some cases, when you might take notes.

Ask the key question: "What else?"

You want the complaining customer to feel that he was completely heard. Asking "what else" invites further comment and shows, not that you want to get this customer out of your hair, but that you are on the customer's side. This might take a few more seconds, but it is a worthy investment in time. Not only will the customer feel better heard, but it will give you more information toward the best solution to the customer's complaint.

Agree that a problem exists; never disagree or argue.

Customer satisfaction is a matter of customer expectation and customer *perception*. You cannot argue against a customer's perceptions.

Apologize.

The matter of the complaint may not be your fault, but you are representing the entire organization. At times the organization is not even at fault, but the customer is "wrong." We apologize anyway. Some useful language: "I apologize for the (inconvenience/frustration/difficulty/...) you have experienced." In the parenthesis, put in a word or two that summarizes the customer's experience. Such language delivers a much more effective apology than, "I'm sorry about this."

Resolve the complaint.

Propose a solution, and if the customer accepts it, move promptly to make the solution happen. If the resolution will require some time (e.g., a new part has to be ordered), explain to the customer clearly when to expect the resolution to be complete.

Thank the customer.

Remember, nineteen or more other customers had a negative experience and didn't bother to tell you. This is your chance to earn a loyal customer, get some positive public relations, and improve your products and

services. "Thank you for calling our attention to this problem." You might follow that with, "We appreciate the chance to make you a happy customer," or in some cases, "Your input will help us prevent this kind of thing from happening to others." You value the customer complaint. Tell the customer so.

Comprehension Question:

9. Which of these is the most effective apology to a customer who has had a bad experience?

- A. "I apologize for the inconvenience you have experienced."
- B. "I'm sorry about that."
- C. "I'm sorry my co-worker is such a jerk."
- D. "I apologize."

Answer:

9-A. See Discussion of Quiz, pp. 32-34.

Types of Complainers and How to Respond Effectively

At least five types of dissatisfied customers can be identified¹. Each type is motivated by different beliefs, attitudes, and needs. Consider the following definitions of the types of complainers, how one might respond to them, and the danger of not handling complaints effectively.

The Meek Customer. Generally, will not complain.

Response: Must work hard at soliciting comments and complaints and act appropriately to resolve complaints.

The Aggressive Customer. Opposite of the Meek Customer, the Aggressive Customer readily complains, often loudly and at length.

Response: Listen completely, ask: "what else?," agree that a problem exists, and indicate what will be done to resolve it and when.

Danger: Being aggressive in return. The Aggressive Customer does not respond well to excuses or reasons why the product or service was unsatisfactory.

The High-Roller Customer. This customer expects the absolute best and is willing to pay for it. Likely to complain in a reasonable manner, unless a hybrid of the Aggressive Customer.

¹ University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS), <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/HR005>

Response: Is interested in results and what you are going to do to recover from the customer service breakdown. Always listen respectfully and actively and question carefully to fully determine cause. Ask: "what else?" and correct the situation. Like the Aggressive Customer, the High-Roller Customer is not interested in excuses.

The Rip-Off Customer. This customer's goal is not to get the complaint satisfied but rather to win by getting something the customer is not entitled to receive. A constant and repetitive "not good enough" response to efforts to satisfy this customer is a sure indicator of a rip-off artist.

Response: Remain unflinchingly objective. Use accurate quantified data to backup your response. Be sure the adjustment is in keeping with what the organization would normally do under the circumstances. Consider asking "What can I do to make things right?" after the first "not good enough."

The Chronic Complainer Customer. This customer is never satisfied; there is always something wrong. This customer's mission is to whine. Yet, he is your customer, and as frustrating as this customer can be, he cannot be dismissed.

Response: Extraordinary patience is required. One must listen carefully and completely and never let one's anger get aroused. A sympathetic ear, a sincere apology, and an honest effort to correct the situation are likely to be the most productive. Unlike the Rip-Off Customer, most Chronic Complainer Customers will accept and appreciate your efforts to make things right. This customer wants an apology and appreciates it when you listen. Tends to be a good customer (in spite of his constant complaining) and will tell others about your positive response to his complaints.

Comprehension Question:

10. T F If you can discern the need or attitude behind the complaint, you will be able to serve the customer more effectively.

Answer:

10-T. See Discussion of Quiz, pp. 32-34.

The Angry Customer

Focus Question:

What actions should I take when confronted by an angry customer?

Dealing with angry customers goes with the territory for anyone who interacts with the public. Customers complain because their perceptions of dealing with a business do not match up to their expectations. But why do some customers complain angrily?

- They have experienced a serious loss because of shortcomings in this business' products or services.
- They previously had a bad experience with this business.
- They have had other events stress them recently (family emergency, difficulty at their job, etc.)
- Displaying aggression this way is part of their make-up. They have learned through life that this is how you "get things done."

Not always is the anger "your fault;" you must not take it personally. Your ultimate goal for the angry customer is the same as for any other customer with a complaint: earn his loyalty, earn good word-of-mouth PR, and gain information to help improve your business. You can do this with the angry customer using the same tools already described. You will just need to use them effectively.....

Listen

When people are upset, the best way for them to get over it is by being sincerely and openly listened to. Your goal is not just to solve the customer's problem; it is to allow them to vent their frustrations so they can let them go. If the angry customer has not completely vented, he is less likely to accept any solution you may offer. So it is a pragmatic move to encourage the angry customer to get it out of his system.

Your language that helps this venting: "

- I see....
- Yes....
- Uh-huh....
- Oh, that's terrible!
- How frustrating.
- Wow.

You can also blend physically with the angry customer by shaking your head, knitting your brow or putting on other facial expressions similar to his.

Ask "What Else?"

Unpleasant as it may feel at the time to have the angry customer unload on you, this is the pragmatic move. Again, you won't get far while the customer is still fuming. Not until the customer believes you have heard and understand his problem and how it has impacted him (including understand of the emotional impact of frustration, etc.) will he be ready to reach a resolution to his problem. Remember, don't take it personally. Just let it flow.

Agree and Apologize

Often a balloon full of anger will deflate instantly when someone owns up to a problem taking responsibility for it. “I see your point. I should have given you a better explanation of what is required for using this tool. I apologize for not giving you all the information you needed.” Such forthright ownership of a problem is rare in our society. When an angry person is on the receiving end of such a direct message of responsibility and apology, he is often surprised right out of hostility. Do you want to know a foolproof way to make complaining customers more irate? Make excuses.

Getting Personal

Once in a long while an angry customer will turn his complaint about a product or service matter into a personal attack on the person who represents the company that has, in his mind, “violated” him. What do you do when an angry customer aggressively fires insults against you? George Thompson presents an interesting strategy he calls “strip phrases” for such situations in his book, *Verbal Judo*. Thompson gives this example, based on his experience as a police officer:

One night early in my career I stopped a pickup truck full of angry drunken cowboys after a rodeo. The driver, who appeared to be twice my size, was in my face calling me all kinds of names. I asked to see his driver’s license and he responded with a bunch of curses. Almost without thinking, I said, “Well, I ‘preciate that, sir, but I need to see your license.”

He kind of laughed me off, but produced his license. Later it struck me that the colloquial use of the word ‘preciate was the key. Of course it had been nonsense! He had impugned my ancestry and cast aspersions on my manhood, and I had said I appreciated it. Think about that. I was figuratively moving my head so his spear of insult clattered past me.

Thompson came up with other strip phrases along with “I ‘preciate that, but...” such as “I understan’ that, but...” and “Uh-huh, that’s right, but...” Such strip phrases strip the attacker of his power because you do not respond in kind with insults, as he expects. To a degree, in fact, you are showing empathy! What comes after the “but...” is your request for action that will move you both closer to resolution. So the mechanic being dressed down by an angry customer might respond, “Yep, that’s right, but I’d like you to tell more about what’s wrong with your car now.”

Using strip phrases with the insulting, angry customer makes you feel good because you are responding to a situation in a way that advances you tactically (helping you get your job done) rather than reacting in a way

that may be habitual but unproductive (returning the insult and thereby fueling the fire). Deflecting insults this way also makes you look good to anyone else who is watching. You are professional.

On the weekends, if you prefer, don’t bother using this technique for deflecting insults. But on the job, it is in the best interests of your company, you, and even the angry insulting customer to let those pejorative remarks slip like water off a duck’s back. You’ve got a job to do of satisfying the customer. Focus on that.

Anger in the Public Eye?

A couple paragraphs above I suggested someone else might be watching the interaction between you and an angry customer. This is very likely in a retail environment or in an office with a reception area. Other customers are bound to be within earshot of an upset customer. A few years ago there was an incident at the adult school where I worked when a very loud and angry person was complaining at length at the front desk. Meanwhile ten other adults were waiting in line to sign up for classes. My impulse at the time was to usher this angry person into a closed-door office to avoid disturbing other customers. Reflecting on that incident, I’m glad we did not move this angry person out of public view. Why?

- Usually if a complaint is made in a loud, aggressive manner, the person complaining looks ridiculous. Other customers will tend to side with the business simply because they find the disturbance distasteful. They conclude that the complainer is having a bad day (which is often the case) or is just crazy.
- In contrast, you have an opportunity to look good and professional as you focus on understanding and promptly addressing the problem of the complaining customer. This can generate positive word-of-mouth advertising for your business form the onlookers.

Comprehension Questions:

11. Which of these are recommended in dealing with an angry customer?
- I. Make jokes about your own failures.
 - II. Ask “What else?”
 - III. Agree that there is a problem.
 - IV. Listen
 - V. Do what your supervisor directs you to do.
- A. I, III, v
B. I, II, III
C. III, IV, V
D. II, III, IV

12. Strip phrases are effective for dealing with a person making a personal attack because...

- A. strip phrases help you get even.
- B. they strip the attacker of his power and focus the interaction on professional business.
- C. they catch the attacker off guard and strip him down with an unexpected insult.
- D. they get any witnesses on your side and make the angry customer feel bad.

Answers:

11-D; 12-B. See Discussion of Quiz, pp. 32-34.

Is the Customer Always Right?

It is a common saying: "The customer is always right." Is this common knowledge true? A manager at a resort in Hawaii often had conversations with her staff around this question. Here is what she concluded after several years in the hospitality business:

The customer is always right, HOWEVER, the customer is NOT always right ... However the customer is feeling right now is their reality, and we have to take the high road, being the good people we are, and figure out what in the world happened causing them to feel as they do. If we had any part in that cause and effect sequence WHATSOEVER, we are the ones who need to make it right. In fact, even if we didn't, we still have to make it right, because this is about who WE are. We are good people.

Don't Forget the Internal Customer!

Not all complaints come from the public who comes to your business. Your internal customers, those co-workers who depend on you to provide services or materials necessary for their jobs, can also complain. The same mindset and skills are appropriate for dealing with complaints from internal customers as for external customers. Neither of these customers is worthy of any more or less respect than the other.

For more on matters of dealing with your co-workers, see the Career Garden modules, *Working in Teams* and *Working With Difficult People*.

4. Organizational Issues

Focus Question:

What must happen at an organizational level in order for individual service providers to be effective in dealing with customers?

I hope at this point you feel a little better equipped to work with the public, particularly with the complaining customer. So far we have looked

at skills for individuals to use in their interactions with customers. But we should briefly address matters that are larger than an individual. As a front-line service-providing worker, you will be able to do your job more effectively if your organization (with its leadership) attends to these. If it is not clear to you where your employer stands in some of these, take responsibility to ask. It might make it easier for you to do your job. It might make you more valuable to your employer.

Policies

Policies are the rules your organization chooses to live by. Related to customer services, a business may have policies for complaint procedures and refund policies that relate very directly to customer service:

Complaint Procedures

Some larger organizations have Complaints Departments which receive all customer problems. Other organizations choose to equip and authorize all employees who interact with the public to resolve the problems of dissatisfied customers. This has an advantage for the customer: The customer's experience is that the first person she talks to in the organization handles her problem. If you don't know the practices in your workplace, find out.

Refund Policies

A store owner once decided he had had his last argument with a customer over a refund. He set as store policy to accept returned merchandise and give refunds to anyone who requested it, no questions asked. In his cash register system he created a category called "Policy." He and his staff used the "Policy" category to record any refunds in which the customer was "wrong." "At the end of the year I had my accountant sum up the cash going out as Policy," he reported. "I was surprised at how little it turned out to be in the whole context of my business." He looked at his Policy expenditures as an investment in advertising. And with this policy in place, he could relax about whether a particular customer was going to get the best of him. He could happily issue a refund, knowing that in the long run he would come out ahead.

Again, whatever the policies are at you're your workplace, know them. Be ready to apply them consistently. And find out when you are permitted to "bend" policy for the sake of quality customer service.

Planning for Change

A potential source of problems for customers is change in the organization. This might be change in location, hours of operation, prices,

services/goods supplied, or policies. An obvious part of planning for change is to advise customers of a coming change using signage on site, announcements on the company website, messages in letters or emails to clients and so forth.

Some changes that an organization might make create ripples throughout procedures in every department. A company I know well recently decided to expand its services to a very different kind of customer, and needed to make adjustments in its service model in order to meet the needs of these new customers without alienating current customers. The company president asked each department head to consult its staff about how the proposed changes would effect operations for that department. This survey gathered information that informed many changes, everything from adding fields to the company database to adding new questions for Customer Service Representatives to ask callers. This process helped the company get its house in order before bringing in new guests. If it hadn't gone through this exercise, it would have seen customer service blunders multiply as wrong information would be given out, incomplete customer information collected, money would flow the wrong way—plenty to upset customers, and by the way, frustrate staff.

Good customer service often requires organizations to change. Excellent customer service requires organizations to prepare themselves and their customers for those changes.

Feedback

It feels good to get hear customers tell you, whether directly or on a survey form, that you are doing a good job. But if your organization is not getting many complaints, you may have a problem on your hands. You may think your customers are totally satisfied if they don't complain, but the opposite may actually be true. Customers may refrain from complaining because:

- They simply dread confrontation and avoid it whenever possible.
- They assume, because it has happened to them before, that it will result in an argument and nothing being done.
- They are procrastinators, who allow problems to accumulate until they become angry and decide to do something about it. That "something" may be unloading on a competitor, another of your customers or worse, a potential customer. Get to them first, before the flood comes.
- They believe that this is an ongoing problem, that you have received many complaints about it and have done nothing, so what's the use?

- They are busy people and thus seek the easy way out: another vendor.

Consider building simple questionnaires for customers to respond to. Think carefully about what specifically you want feedback on, and be sure the questions you ask will tell you what you want to know about. And make sure it is easy for the customer to get their responses to you.

You can build your customer service expertise by collecting customer service surveys from businesses you use and from other businesses in the industry where you work or aspire to work. (Do the businesses a favor back by responding to their questionnaires!) A customer satisfaction survey from a restaurant may give you insight even if you are aiming to work, say, in a pharmacy. Whatever kind of business you work in, customers are making judgments based on the RATER elements (Reliability, Assurance, Tangibles, Empathy, Responsiveness).

Comprehension Questions:

13. Which of these are activities that *any* employee can initiate to help her company provide excellent customer service?
- A. write policies; create customer surveys
 - B. ask customers for feedback; discuss with management potential problems caused by proposed changes
 - C. study customer satisfaction surveys for other companies; issue refunds to customers
 - D. learn company policies; post announcements on company website

Answer:

13-B. See Discussion of Quiz, pp. 32-34.

5. Broadening Your Experience Base

We all have some kind of knowledge of customer service as we have been customers. And most of us who have worked some have further experience in customer service as a service provider, whether serving internal or external customers. You can broaden your customer service knowledge by learning about the experiences of others. We have structured an activity to help you do just that.

On the following page is a Customer Service Interview worksheet. Your task is to talk to someone who is working—preferably in the same industry or job type you aspire to work in—to learn from that person's customer service experiences. The person you interview might be, for example, your current supervisor, a friend who works in the kind of job you want, that friend's supervisor, or a relative whose work involves public contact. (See the Career Garden module, *Networking and Informational Interviews*, for more about finding the people you want to

talk to.) Then, after the interview, reflect on what you have heard. What in this person’s real-world experience goes along with, supports, or affirms what you have read in this module? What in the interviewee’s experience seems counter to what you have read here, or appears to be evidence to the contrary of the ideas in this module?

Below are the questions you are to ask, and sample notes of what you might write down to help you remember the conversation. (These are not the “right answers.” There are none. The sample below shows how detailed your notes should be.) You also see sample notes in the Reflection section, to be done after the interview.

Interviewee: Apu Nahasapeemahpetilon Business: Kwick-E Mart
 Interviewer: Susan Date: 11/27/07

1. What do you think makes the biggest difference in customers’ decisions to continue using your business?

Convenient location & hours, and personal touch: “Thank you, come again.”

2. Can you tell me a story of a time you had a dissatisfied customer that you “turned around” and made happy? What was the critical element that turned the customer from dissatisfied to satisfied?

Event: Complaint about expiration dates on milk.	Critical Element: Replaced the milk.
---	---

3. Can you recall a specific time when you dealt with an angry customer? What strategies helped? What would you do differently?

Event: Customer yelled, angry about prices.	Helped: Let him blow steam.	To Do Differently: Don't try to justify the prices.
--	--------------------------------	--

4. What does your business do to assess customer satisfaction? Do you use any kind of customer surveys?

Customers will complain if they want to.

5. When hiring decisions are made at your business, how much do decision-makers consider applicants’ customer service skills?

No plans to hire, but if he did, applicant must be able to say “Thank you, come again” to all customers.

Reflection on Interview

Question	Ideas/experience of interviewee that affirm what I’ve read:	Ideas/experience of interviewee that raise questions about what I’ve read:
1	Thank customers.	
2	Easy return policy is good.	
3	Don't argue with customer.	
4		Kwick-E Mart successful even without any proactive customer feedback methods.
5	Thank customers.	

The next pages give you a form for recording notes with a real person (not a cartoon character) that you interview about customer service.

Summary

In this module you have seen a rationale for customer service. Investments in money and effort pay off on the bottom line for business, even while they often make the workplace a more pleasant place to be. You have been presented the basic essential practices of customer service (do’s and don’ts). And you have thought about how to deal with what many of us fear most: customer complaints and angry customers. To help you serve your organization as effectively as possible, we’ve also asked you to think about some of the organizational issues that are beyond the scope of a particular service provider. Finally, your interview gave you more real-life experiences in customer service to affirm (or refute) what you have read about here.

Customer Service Interview

Interview someone about their experience in customer service. Later reflect on the content of the interview.

Interviewee: _____ Business: _____

Interviewer: _____ Date: _____

1. What do you think makes the biggest difference in customers' decisions to continue using your business?

--

2. Can you tell me a story of a time you had a dissatisfied customer that you "turned around" and made happy? What was the critical element that turned the customer from dissatisfied to satisfied?

Event:	Critical Element:
--------	-------------------

3. Can you recall a specific time when you dealt with an angry customer? What strategies helped? What would you do differently?

Event:	Helped:	To Do Differently:
--------	---------	--------------------

4. What does your business do to assess customer satisfaction? Do you use any kind of customer surveys?

--

5. When hiring decisions are made at your business, how much do decision-makers consider applicants' customer service skills?

--

Reflection on Interview:

Question	Ideas/experience of interviewee that affirm what I've read:	Ideas/experience of interviewee that raise questions about what I've read:
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		

Review Questions

1. Which of these are reasons for emphasizing customer service?

- A. It costs more to keep a customer happy than to recruit a new customer.
- B. Focusing on the "internal customer" makes a business work less efficiently.
- C. Good customer service is the least important factor when people decide where to do business.
- D. A, B, and C.
- E. None of the above.

2. T F It is usually best not to say anything about the products and services sold by your competitors.

3. T F If the customer asks a question you don't know the answer to, it is better to make something up than to look uninformed.

4. Which of these sets of actions demonstrates responsiveness to the customer?

- A. Greeting the customer, answering customer questions, arguing with the customer.
- B. Suggesting which store carries the item the customer seeks, waiting for the customer to ask questions, pausing a long time before moving to assist a customer.
- C. Finding out the need or interest behind the customer's question, presenting various options, shaking the customer's hand.
- D. Suggesting which store carries the item the customer seeks, greeting the customer, answering customer questions.

5. T F Listening is the process of discovering the customer's needs.

6. T F Speaking softly with those who speak loudly is one small way to build trust with that other person.

7. Which of these helps present a positive image to the customer?

- I. Telling how often your supervisor makes the same mistakes.
 - II. Varying the pitch, volume and speed of your speech.
 - III. Keeping your work area organized.
 - IV. Letting the customer hear your conversations with co-workers about matters not related to work.
- A. I, II, III, IV
 - B. I, II, III
 - C. II, III
 - D. II, III, IV

8. Which of these is recommended for providing customer service over the phone?

- A. Gesture and smile on the phone, just as you would in talking to someone in person.
- B. Be silent while the other person is talking.
- C. When dealing with a face-to-face customer, you should not answer the phone.
- D. The customer is always right.

9. Which of these is the most effective apology to a customer who has had a bad experience?

- A. "I apologize for the inconvenience you have experienced."
- B. "I'm sorry about that."
- C. "I'm sorry my co-worker is such a jerk."
- D. "I apologize."

10. T F If you can discern the need or attitude behind the complaint, you will be able to serve the customer more effectively.

11. Which of these are recommended in dealing with an angry customer?

- I. Make jokes about your own failures.
 - II. Ask "What else?"
 - III. Agree that there is a problem.
 - IV. Listen
 - V. Do what your supervisor directs you to do.
- A. I, III, V
 - B. I, II, III
 - C. III, IV, V
 - D. II, III, IV

12. Strip phrases are effective for dealing with a person making a personal attack because...

- A. strip phrases help you get even.
- B. they strip the attacker of his power and focus the interaction on professional business.
- C. they catch the attacker off guard and strip him down with an unexpected insult.
- D. they help you feel good and help the angry customer feel bad.

13. Which of these are activities that any employee can initiate to help her company provide excellent customer service?

- A. write policies; create customer surveys
- B. ask customers for feedback; discuss with management potential problems caused by proposed changes
- C. study customer satisfaction surveys for other companies; issue refunds to customers
- D. learn company policies; post announcements on company website

Discussion of Quiz

1. Which of these are reasons for emphasizing customer service?

- A. It costs more to keep a customer happy than to recruit a new customer.
- Correct.

B. Focusing on the "internal customer" makes a business work less efficiently.

Incorrect. Treating my colleagues as customers helps an organization run more smoothly.

C. Good customer service is the least important factor when people decide where to do business.

Incorrect. In an environment of increased customer choice, customer service is an area where a business can make itself shine.

D. A, B, and C.

E. None of the above.

2. T F It is usually best not to say anything about the products and services sold by your competitors.

False. You should be ready to help a customer compare her options.

3. T F If the customer asks a question you don't know the answer to, it is better to make something up than to look uninformed.

False. Being informed is very important, but giving the customer correct information is more important than *looking* informed.

4. Which of these sets of actions demonstrates responsiveness to the customer?

A. Greeting the customer, answering customer questions, arguing with the customer.

Incorrect. Never argue with the customer.

B. Suggesting which store carries the item the customer seeks, waiting for the customer to ask questions, pausing a long time before moving to assist a customer.

Incorrect. Waiting for the customer to ask questions might be responsive if you have already offered assistance. Pausing a long time is not responsive.

C. Finding out the need or interest behind the customer's question, presenting various options, shaking the customer's hand.

Incorrect. Discerning customer needs and suggesting options demonstrate responsiveness. Shaking hands may not be appropriate in many contexts.

D. Suggesting which store carries the item the customer seeks, greeting the customer, answering customer questions.

Correct.

5. T F Listening is the process of discovering the customer's needs.

True. The service-provider does not assume he knows the customer's needs before she explains them.

6. T F Speaking softly with those who speak loudly is one small way to build trust with that other person.

False. Blending builds trust by minimizing differences; to blend, speak softly with those who speak softly.

7. Which of these helps present a positive image to the customer?

I. Telling how often your supervisor makes the same mistakes.

Complaining about co-workers makes a negative image.

II. Varying the pitch, volume and speed of your speech.

This is a sign of enthusiasm which is considered a positive trait.

III. Keeping your work area organized.

This creates a positive image.

IV. Letting the customer hear your conversations with co-workers about matters not related to work.

This usually creates a negative image, making the impression that you come to work to socialize rather than to attend to business.

A. I, II, III, IV

B. I, II, III

C. II, III

D. II, III, IV

C is correct.

8. Which of these is recommended for providing customer service over the phone?

A. Gesture and smile on the phone, just as you would in talking to someone in person.

Correct. These non-verbal behaviors are reflected subtly in speech. The caller gets a little bit more information this way.

B. Be silent while the other person is talking.

Incorrect. It is even more important in phone talk to use phrases such as "yes ...I see... uh-huh..." to indicate to the caller that you are following.

C. When dealing with a face-to-face customer, you should not answer the phone.

Incorrect. Your face-to-face customer is usually considered to have priority. But if you are the only employee available, interrupt your face-to-face customer to answer the call; tell the caller you are serving someone else and you'll be with them shortly.

D. The customer is always right.

Incorrect. This adage does not apply particularly to service over the phone; it does not answer the question.

9. Which of these is the most effective apology to a customer who has had a bad experience?

A. "I apologize for the inconvenience you have experienced."

Correct. This uses the stronger words, "I apologize," and recognizes part of the customer's experience, "inconvenience."

B. "I'm sorry about that."

Incorrect. "I'm sorry" are weaker words than I apologize. And recognizing the customer's negative experience by naming it (rather than using the vague "about that") would also strengthen this apology.

C. "I'm sorry my co-worker is such a jerk."

Incorrect. This is clearly a criticism of a co-worker; it is inappropriate for use with a customer.

D. "I apologize."

Incorrect. This would be stronger if it identified the negative experience of the customer – confusion, inconvenience, etc.

10. T F If you can discern the need or attitude behind the complaint, you will be able to serve the customer more effectively.

True. You may have options the customer is not aware of that will meet the customer's real interests.

11. Which of these are recommended in dealing with an angry customer?

I. Make jokes about your own failures.

Not recommended. The customer is probably not in a laughing mood.

II. Ask "What else?"

Recommended. Make sure the customer feels you have heard him out.

III. Agree that there is a problem.

Recommended. In a way, there is a problem whenever the customer perceives a problem.

IV. Listen

Recommended. Sometime a thorough listening is all the customer needs, and little else.

V. Do what your supervisor directs you to do.

Generally this is recommended. But this is not particular to dealing with an angry customer.

In fact, in some organizations it is policy that whoever first receives a customer complaint should bring it all the way to resolution.

A. I, III, V

B. I, II, III

C. III, IV, V

D. II, III, IV

D is correct.

12. Strip phrases are effective for dealing with a person making a personal attack because...

A. strip phrases help you get even.

Incorrect. Strip phrases do not match insult to insult.

B. they strip the attacker of his power and focus the interaction on professional business.

Correct.

C. they catch the attacker off guard and strip him down with an unexpected insult.

Incorrect. Strip phrases do put the angry person off balance because they usually expect an attack in return.

D. they help you feel good and help the angry customer feel bad.

Incorrect. While the strip phrase might make you feel good because it advances your professional interests, this good feeling is not the reason the strip phrase is effective.

13. Which of these are activities that any employee can initiate to help her company provide excellent customer service?

A. write policies; create customer surveys

Incorrect. Usually designated employees--not any employee-- write policy, though it is often valuable to have the viewpoints of all employees considered in policy creation.

B. ask customers for feedback; discuss with management potential problems caused by proposed changes

Correct. Any employee can do both of these.

C. study customer satisfaction surveys for other companies; issue refunds to customers

Incorrect. Usually only designated employees issue refunds.

D. learn company policies; post announcements on company website

Incorrect. All employees should learn company policies. Usually only designated policies update the company website.

Prepare to Meet Your Coach

Student _____ **Name:** _____

Bring these items completed when you meet with your instructor or coach.

Reflective Writing: What idea or activity in this module has been the most helpful to you? Why?

What questions do you still have?

Instructor

Record student performance in right column of the table.

Item	%age of Module	Standard	Student Performance
Customer Service Interview	40	Names, business and date must be completed. Something written in each box for questions 1-5. In Reflection section, 5 or more boxes should contain a statement assessing a practice the interviewee described.	
Review Questions	60	10 of 13 correct	
Total:			

Instructor

Date Module Completed: _____

Notes:

Next Assignment & Due Date: _____