Customer Relations

General Principles for Good Customer Relations

Who is the customer?
Whatever role you have within the facility, you are in the business of customer service. Whether you are a housekeeper, nurse, unit secretary, or dietician, good customer relations are an important part of everyone's job.

Who is a customer? A customer is anyone to whom you provide service.

There are 2 basic types of customer:

- Internal customer
- External customer

Internal Customers
It may seem strange to think of fellow staff members as customers, but internal customers are other people who work at the facility. They include physicians and other professionals, employees of other departments, and other staff members. They are the other people that you provide service to in your facility.

Some employees or departments serve mostly internal customers. Their job is to provide service to other departments or employees. Examples include:

- Human Resources
- Computer Information Systems

External Customers
External customers are people who come into the facility from the outside. They include patients, visitors, and families. They might also include others, such as outside companies, delivery people, and other community members or organizations.

In your job, you may work with other employees, patients, families, visitors. All of these people are your customers. It is common to have both internal and external customers. For example, nursing staff follow the directions of physicians to provide patient care. These are just two of the many customers that nursing staff serve.

The importance of good customer relations
The key to good customer service is to treat other people the way you would like to be treated.

In dealing with internal customers, maintaining good customer relations is important. It can help to provide a good working environment and a quality standard of care.

In dealing with patients and families, maintaining good customer relations is also important. It is important because of:

- Patient choice
- Quality of care.

Patient choice
Patients have a choice about where they go for healthcare services. Although many health
plans limit choices, patients may choose their insurance coverage based on the choice of facility they may go to. If customer service is not good and if patients do not feel that a facility cares about them, they may take their business somewhere else.

Quality of care
When patients go to a facility to seek health care, they become dependent on someone else. They must trust someone else to tell them what is wrong with them and how they will be treated. Patients experience a real lack of empowerment. They feel that they are not in control of what is happening to them. They may have questions about what is happening, what will be done, how long it will take. A vital component of customer service is to answer all their questions and give them confidence that the facility will provide the quality of care they want.

Other factors also cause patients to feel of a lack of empowerment:

- They are assigned a room
- They are given a number
- They are given an ID bracelet
- They are asked very personal questions
- They are seen by different people who come in and out of the room at various times.

Even though these things may be necessary, they can make patients feel that they have no control. Understanding how a patient may feel in this situation can result in better and more considerate care. It is an important component of customer relations.

Building good customer relations
The key to good customer service is to treat others the way you would want to be treated or the way you would want your loved ones to be treated in a similar situation. It often means simply being courteous and helpful. Above all, remember that things that may be routine for you are NOT routine for patients or their families.

There are many small things that you can do to make a patient feel more confident and cared for:

- Knock when you enter a room, even if the door is open.
- Introduce yourself.
- Call the patient by name.
- Explain what you are going to do.
- Use terms that the patient can understand.
- If you do not know the answer to a question, find out.

In reception areas, there are also steps that you can take to build good customer relations:

- Always acknowledge a person's presence
- Keep patients informed if there will be a delay.

It is important to acknowledge a person's presence. Even if you cannot stop, at least make eye contact and smile so that people know they have been seen. Then return and provide assistance as soon as possible.

In some cases, patients may need to wait before being seen. If so, explain why and give a reasonable estimate of how long the wait will be. If the wait is long, keep them informed.
Customer Relations on the Telephone

A question of courtesy
We all use the telephone on a regular basis. Most of us take it for granted. We do not often think about using the telephone as a skill. If using the telephone is a part of your job, however, your telephone skills can be very important.

Remember that the people you speak with on the telephone are your customers. When you use the telephone as a part of your job, you are providing customer service.

Your telephone skills reflect on your facility. Providing effective telephone service is a part of building good customer relations. It is your chance to make a good impression for your facility.

Smiling and listening carefully are a part of serving customers courteously on the telephone.

Good customer service is often a question of courtesy. This is also true when dealing with customers on the telephone.

Courteous customer service includes:

- Answering the phone by the third ring whenever possible
- Stating your name and title and the name of your department
- Addressing customers by name
- Listening carefully
- Taking messages courteously
- Transferring calls carefully
- Asking questions tactfully.

Your tone of voice is also an important part of building good customer relations on the telephone.

- Smile (even though it can't be seen, it will affect how you sound)
- Speak clearly
- Be polite.
Clear communication
When people speak face to face, much of the communication is non-verbal. Non-verbal communication includes:

- Facial expressions
- Gestures
- Body language.

Non-verbal communication does not occur in a telephone conversation. This means that there is a greater chance of a failure in communication.

There are steps that you can take to make sure telephone communication is clearly understood by both yourself and the other person.

- If you are giving instructions, ask for feedback to make sure that they are correctly understood
- Repeat any information you are given so that the other person can correct any errors
- Write down any messages you need to pass on to someone else.

Effective service
The goal of telephone communication is to provide effective customer service. This means:

- Being sensitive to the customer’s needs
- Providing the information the customer requires.

Telephone communication is part of the customer’s relationship with the facility. Your customers include everyone to whom you provide service on the telephone, such as patients, family members, and other employees.

Patients and family members need to feel that they are important and that the facility cares about them. Fellow employees need a courteous and supportive work environment. The service that you provide on the telephone is an important part of building a trusting relationship with your customers.

Do not leave customers on hold for extended periods of time.
Effective telephone service also means providing the information customers require. This includes:

- Avoiding saying, "I don't know"
- Avoiding putting customers on hold for long periods
- Avoiding transferring a caller to a string of different departments.

No one expects you to know the answer to every question. If you are asked a question and you do not know the answer, tell the caller that you will find out and return the call. Then do it promptly.

Do not put customers on hold without asking permission. If there is a long wait, check back frequently to give an update and to ask if they would like to continue holding.

As a customer, it is very frustrating to be transferred to department after department. If you must transfer a caller, be sure that you transfer the call to a department that can provide the information needed. If you are not sure, offer to find out the information and call the customer back. Also, when you do transfer a call to another phone, make sure that the call is connected before you hang up.

Finally, when you take a message for someone else, it is important to get all the necessary information. Record the name of the caller and time of the call, as well as the subject. Be sure to indicate whether a return call is required.

End of Customer Relations Lesson