

## Informing your customers

- Do you know who your customers are?

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- Do you understand their point of view?

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- Knowing your customers and their point of view is important if you are to inform them effectively.

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In this first of two linked sessions we will look at the skills you need to inform your customers. The other linked session is *Persuading and negotiating with your customers*. This session builds on the following **BS2** sessions, all of which are relevant to a team leader who communicates with external customers:

- ❖ *Understanding communication*
- ❖ *Speaking and listening effectively*
- ❖ *Handling confidential information*
- ❖ *Your customer's requirements*

You should have completed those sessions before starting this one, as some of what you are going to be looking at builds on them.

A team leader who works in a **customer facing** part of an organisation will have to deal with customers. Customer facing simply means any part of an organisation that is designed to provide customers with goods or services, with information, advice or other forms of help. It could mean a sales or customer service area, or a technical support, helpdesk or helpline.

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However, many customer focussed organisations with self-managing production or back office teams expect them to deal directly with customers as well. This could be done so that they are able to clarify customers' requirements better, provide them with information or use these contacts to solve problems. Whatever role you have, you need to be able to deal with customers effectively.

## Know your customers

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The first step to dealing effectively with your customers is to know who they are. Are they businesses or consumers? Business customers doesn't just mean private sector businesses, it could be public sector organisations (like local councils, hospitals or schools) or it could be voluntary sector organisations (like charities, community organisations or trades unions). Organisations that deal with other organisations are often described as being **B2B** organisations. B2B means *business to business*. In this case, business means any type of organisation.

## Exercise

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Does your organisation deal with business customers? If so, what kind of organisations are they? Find out as much as you can about them.

- ❖ Are they private sector, public sector or voluntary sector, or a combination?
- ❖ What industry or industries are they in (such as manufacturing, construction, health care, education, insurance, etc)?
- ❖ How big are they? Small organisations employ less than 50 people, medium less than 250, and large 250+.
- ❖ Where are they based (locally, regionally, nationally or internationally)?
- ❖ Who in them do you normally deal with (purchasing specialists, production or operations managers, office or finance managers, etc.)

How much of this did you already know, and how much did you have to find out? Were there any surprises?

Instead of business and other organisations, your customers might be **consumers**. Consumers are individuals who are buying goods and services for themselves or their families. They are also service users, members or clients of public and voluntary sector organisations. Organisations serving consumers are often called **B2C** organisations. B2C means *business to consumer*. Again, business means any type of organisation supplying goods or services to individuals.

If you supply goods or services to individuals you need to know who they are. Although most goods and services are for anyone, many are only bought or used by a limited range of people. Most clothes, whether women's, children's or men's are bought by women (who buy for themselves, their children and their husbands or partners.) The same is true for groceries and similar items. The majority of users of health care services are children, young to middle aged women (expectant mothers especially) and elderly men and women.

### Exercise

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Does your organisation deal with individual consumers or service users, etc? If so, what kind of people are they? Find out as much as you can about them.

- ❖ Mainly male or female, young or old, in families or single?
- ❖ Do they tend to be of any particular ethnic background?
- ❖ Where are they based (locally, regionally, nationally or internationally)?

How much of this did you already know, and how much did you have to find out? Were there any surprises?

### Why do you need to know your customers?

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Knowing your customers is a necessary step in being able to deal with them. You can't inform, persuade or negotiate with people if you don't know who they are or why they might want to buy or use your goods or services. Knowing them helps you to **empathise** with them. Empathise means to be able to put yourself in somebody else's position, to think and feel like them. Empathy helps you to understand other people's behaviour and attitudes. That way, you can look at the service you give to customers and see how well it meets their needs.

## Case Study

Netta leads the team which looks after the animals in a pet rescue centre. She always talks to the people who bring animals in. She is always sympathetic, especially when it is their own pet.

One of her team, Fiona, asks her why she bothers.

Fiona: “It’s not like they are doing something good. They shouldn’t have a pet if they can’t look after it. It’s cruel to just dump an animal because you can’t be bothered.”

Netta: “That’s not fair. Many of them are really upset. Often they didn’t realise what they were letting themselves in for. Some of them have got young children and they are worried about their children getting injured. They could have just dumped it or let anyone have the animal. They come here because they know we’ll make sure they go to the right home.”

Fiona: “I hadn’t thought of it like that. I’ll try and be nicer to them in future.”

Netta: “Do. If word gets out that we don’t judge people, more are likely to bring pets in rather than have them put down or neglect them.”

Empathising doesn’t mean that you have to agree with how someone thinks and feels, but to be able to see the world the way that they see it. That way you can understand why they make the decisions they do.

## Customer decision-making

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If you look at the goods or services you provide for your customers, you will see that they have many different **features**. Features are those aspects of the goods or services that make them what they are.

- ❖ A laundry may be able to collect and deliver to people’s homes in the evenings.
- ❖ A car may be able to use bio-fuels.
- ❖ A hospital may have a leading team of surgeons providing leading edge treatments.
- ❖ A school may be small and in a quiet rural area.

As the provider of these goods and services to customers you will know the features well. When you talk to customers, you may well tell them about these features. Unfortunately, you may find that they aren't that interested in the features. What customers want are **benefits**. Benefits are what customers get from the features.

### Features

### Benefits

A laundry may be able to collect and deliver to people's homes in the evenings.

People can receive their laundry when they get home from work, and handover items to be laundered.

A car may be able to use bio-fuels.

Lower cost and less harmful to the environment.

A hospital may have a leading team of surgeons providing leading edge treatments.

More likely to be cured.

A school may be small and in a quiet rural area.

A safe, friendly place where the children and staff all know each other.

## Exercise

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Look at the goods or services that your organisation provides to its customers. List the main features below, and then look at each one as 'What are the benefits for customers?'

Features	Benefits

## Informing your customers

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So far we have looked at:

- ❖ Who your customers are.
- ❖ The importance of understanding your customers' points of view (empathy).
- ❖ Recognising that customers are interested in *benefits* not *features*.

These three ideas are important when it comes to **informing** customers. Informing means passing on information to people *which they receive and understand*. All too often we forget the second part of that. In the **BS2** session *Understanding communication* you learnt that communication has four main elements:

1. A **transmitter** (sending the message).
2. A **message** (what the transmitter wants others to know).
3. A **receiver** (to whom the message is addressed).
4. A **channel** (the way that the message is sent).

Without the receiver getting the message and understanding it, then the sender's time and effort were wasted. When you inform customers, you are sending them messages, but they will only understand them if:

- ❖ you understand who they are ....

...so that you can understand their points of view ...

.... and inform them about the benefits to them  
of your product or service, not the features.

Why is this important? It's important because you will be able to speak to them in language that they understand and deal with the things they are concerned about. Customers may not have the level of knowledge that you have, so they won't know how to describe problems or they may misuse technical language.

If customers don't know the right language or how things work they will get dissatisfied if you show a lack of respect or point out their mistakes impertinently. You may know more than they do, but you don't make a good impression on customers by telling them that. Listen to what customers are saying, help them to describe things in ways that help you to diagnose their problems or their needs and then explain things to them clearly. Read the case study over the page to see what this means in practice.

## Case Study

John leads the team on the technical help desk of a small Internet Service Provider. The company offers a broadband service to smaller businesses. It is not the cheapest but strives to be the best. This means that it aims to ensure customers get a near perfect service, with virtually no failures of service. They monitor customers' connections and can often identify a fault before the customer knows it's there.

John is training Paul, a new technician. He is alerted automatically to a customer whose connection keeps dropping. He shows Paul how to check the customer details and tells him to 'phone the contact person.

Paul: "Hi, it's Paul here from Peters and Parsons. Is that June Hastings?"

June: "Yes. Is there a problem?"

Paul: "It looks like it. Your broadband connection keeps dropping. Have you noticed it?"

June: "Well yes, I had noticed that it doesn't load webpages immediately, and I've had several 'error' notices on the email. Is there a problem with the telephone line? I saw them working on a neighbour's line"

Paul: "It could be that, or it could be a software hitch or your router. What sort of configuration have you got?"

June: "How do you mean?"

John: (to Paul) "Ask her how the system is set up."

Paul: "Sorry. How is your system set up? Do you have one computer linked in or is it a network?"

June: "Oh, I see. There are three computers connected through a black box that's plugged into a little white box that's plugged into the telephone box on the wall."

John: (to Paul) Tell her what they are called so you can explain what she needs to do."

Paul: "Right, thanks. The black box is called your router, the little white box is probably a line filter, and the box on the wall is the master socket. We need to start by looking at the router, the black box. Can you see it easily?"

June: "Yes, it's right by me here."

Paul: "Good. Let's start working out what the problem is"

In this case study you can see how John steered Paul towards speaking in terms the customer could understand. Customers don't need to be experts in your products or services, you do. They expect you to know everything but to be able to talk to them in their language.

If June had known more about computer systems, Paul could have talked to her in technical language. The other danger you face is seeming to talk down to people. If Paul had started by talking about black boxes and white boxes, June may have replied: "I've got a four port Vigor 2800 router with a Fujitsu filter and line splitter plugged into directly into the master socket with no extensions wired off it." In other words, she might be as expert as him (or even more so) and will regard him as being condescending and, possibly, sexist.

When you talk to customers, use a little **jargon** but with 'translations' into ordinary English at first. Jargon is words and phrases that are used within an industry or specialist technical area. It makes communication between specialists easier, but can exclude non-specialists. Be alert to customers' reactions. If they seem to understand, continue to use jargon, but always monitor their replies, to check they do understand. If they don't switch to everyday terms, but use technical language as well, where it will help you to get the message over. You will educate your customers as you do it.

This is one reason to know who your customers are. In a 'B2B' organisation, you can often expect customers to be experts, but Paul works for a company supplying small businesses and can't make that assumption. In the second of these two sessions (*Persuading and negotiating with your customers*), we will continue to explore communication with customers by looking at how you persuade and negotiate with your customers.

### Exercise

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Can you expect your customers to know the jargon relating to your products and services?    Yes                       No

How would you be able to tell if a customer did understand the jargon? What common words or phrases that you use would tell you?

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## Comprehension Check

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Complete the following exercises. Refer back to the session if necessary.

**A. Complete the following statements.**

1. An organisation supplying other organisations is often described as being a \_\_\_\_\_ organisation.
2. An organisation supplying individuals is often described as being a \_\_\_\_\_ organisation.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ are individual customers or service users, buying or receiving the service for their own or their family's use.
4. Organisations tend to look at the \_\_\_\_\_ of their products or services, but customers are interested in their \_\_\_\_\_.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ is the ability to put yourself in another person's position and see things from their \_\_\_\_\_.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ is the technical language used by specialists.

**B. To be able to inform customers effectively you need to be able to know and understand:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

## Making Connections

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Answer the questions following the case.

Paul, of Peters and Parsons, has had a call from a customer. The customer, Alan, has asked him if he is getting the speed of broadband that he wants.

Alan: "I was promised speeds of up to '8 M-b-p-s', whatever that is, but my son says that I'm only getting around 3M-b-p-s. I wondered why there was a difference. Is it something I'm doing?"

Paul: "You are only getting three megs not eight? Can you give me your number, the line you're on, and I can check the speed."

Alan: "This number? It's 01749 453526."

Paul: "Are you sure? Is that the broadband line?"

Alan: "Oh, you mean the broadband line. No, that's 453425."

Paul: "Right I'm looking at your graph now and you're getting up to 4 megs. Have you done the line test to see what the line max. is from your exchange?"

Alan: "Sorry, say that again."

- ❖ Do you think that Paul is communicating effectively with Alan? Why or why not?

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## Think and Apply

How well do you use the skills in this session?

- ❖ Do you know who your customers are?
- ❖ Do you understand your customers' point of view?
- ❖ Can you distinguish between the features and benefits of your organisation's products and services?
- ❖ Can you give your customers information so that they receive and understand it?

1. Read the list of skills. Tick the boxes to show your strengths and weaknesses.

<i>Skills</i>	<i>strengths &lt;- - - -&gt; weaknesses</i>			
	I'm good at this	I'm quite good at this	I'm not so good at this	I'm quite poor at this
■ identifying customers and their points of view	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
■ talking to customers about benefits rather than features	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
■ knowing when to avoid jargon	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. Do you want to improve any of these skills?

3. How do you plan to improve the skills you listed in question 2? (You might want to discuss this with your line manager or your tutor/mentor/coach.)