

Your customer's requirements

- When you hear the word customer, what do you think of?

- How well does your customer service meet customers' requirements?

- To provide good customer service, identify your customers and focus on their needs.

There are many different kinds of customers. In a restaurant, someone who comes in and orders a meal is a customer. A patient at a doctor's surgery is a customer. A passenger on a train is a customer. A student at a college is a customer. A member of your team at work is a customer. A manager in the organisation is a customer. All these people are customers, but they may not want to be called customers. What they want is to be treated as if they matter. They want you to show that you care about what they require from you and the goods or services that you supply. Above all, they want to be treated with respect.

Know your external customers

The diner in the restaurant, the doctor's patient, the train passenger and the college student are all examples of **external customers**. External customer means that the customer comes from outside the organisation. External customers buy or use the goods or services that your organisation supplies.

Why are customers so important?

All organisations exist for a purpose. A restaurant exists to provide meals, a hospital to provide health care, a garage to repair cars, a logistics company to store and distribute goods. Why? Do restaurants just like cooking food or logistics companies to have lots of vehicles moving around? Of course not. They exist because they have customers who want meals, health care, cars repaired, goods stored and distributed. Without customers - or service users, clients, etc. - there is no reason for them to exist. People in many organisations make jokes about their customers - 'Without the customers/students/patients/passengers this would be a great job'. But, of course, without them there wouldn't be a job.

Customers can be of all sorts. The blood transfusion service is a good example of the range of possible external customers an organisation can have. They have:

- ❖ donors, who give blood
- ❖ hospitals, to whom they supply blood, blood products and advice on storing and using blood
- ❖ private companies, to whom they sell blood and blood products to produce other products for supply to the health service
- ❖ patients, for whom the blood may be a life saver.

External customers usually have a choice about where they do business when they are buying goods or services and, increasingly where they obtain public services (such as education or health care). That's why it's important to know these customers well and give good customer service.

You may not call your customers 'customers'. You might call them patients, students, passengers, service users, clients or diners. The fact that they buy or use the goods or services that you provide makes them customers, but it doesn't mean that you have to call them by that name. Many people hate being called 'customers' when they are on 'planes, trains or buses. They are passengers. They hate being called customers when they are at the doctor's or in hospital. They are patients.

Organisations that say they are committed to 'high quality customer service' shouldn't address their customers by a name those customers don't like. Treating people as customers doesn't mean labelling them as customers. Your job, as a team leader, is to make sure that your team keeps thinking of them as customers and treating them like customers.

Exercise

What about your *external customers*? Who are they? They are the people outside the organisation who buy or use the goods or services you and your team supply. If you don't deal directly with them, they are still there.

- ❖ Write down the main groups of external customers you serve.
- ❖ Beside each one, write down what you think they require from you.

<i>Customers</i>	<i>Requirements</i>

The following case study shows how one company responds to its customers' requirements.

Case Study

MusicToGo.com is an online store supplying MP3 players. MP3 players are portable music players that store large amounts of music on an internal memory. There are plenty of such devices on the market and plenty of places to buy them, so MusicToGo.com has to make sure it offers the most up-to-date models, the lowest prices and the best customer service.

It knows that, once it customers have decided to buy an MP3 player

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they are impatient to get it, so they pride themselves on the speed of their service. Unfortunately customers can't see this service until the items arrive. Because all aspects of the business are controlled by computer, MusicToGo.com tracks everything from the moment that the order is placed until it is delivered by courier. They therefore decide to make this information available to their customers.

Once customers have placed their order they get a unique order number that allows them to track the order. They can see when:

- ❖ the order has been passed to the warehouse
- ❖ the item ordered has been picked from stock
- ❖ it has been packaged ready for delivery
- ❖ it has been collected by the courier
- ❖ it arrives in the courier's depot
- ❖ it is despatched to their local depot
- ❖ it arrives at their local depot
- ❖ it leaves to be delivered
- ❖ when they signed for its arrival.

They know that many customers remain logged on to monitor the progress of the order and they get hundreds of emails every week telling them what a great service they offer.

Here are some more, brief examples of what customers require from suppliers:

Supplier	Customers require:
<i>Airlines</i>	On-time, comfortable, low-cost service
<i>Health Care</i>	Correct diagnosis, minimum wait time, effective cure
<i>Food Services</i>	Good flavour, fast delivery, good environment
<i>Postal Services</i>	Fast delivery, correct delivery, minimum cost
<i>Education/training</i>	Proper preparation, effective delivery and learning
<i>Consumer Products</i>	Properly made, defect-free, cost effective
<i>Insurance</i>	Pay outs on time, reasonable cost
<i>Cars</i>	Defect-free, low running costs, many extras included in the price

MusicToGo.com has identified what its customers require and has designed its processes around providing high quality customer service. It did this by setting up computer systems, backed up by operational systems and procedures (ways of working) that made sure goods were moved as quickly as possible. That's one way of trying to meet requirements. The list of different organisations and their customers' requirements shows you how varied these can be.

The hardest part is making sure that these requirements are met, consistently. If your organisation is supplying a personal service, like personal care, hairdressing or health care, it all comes down to how team members treat customers, face to face. The next case study shows how a nurse responds to the requirements of a patient (or customer).

Case Study

Robert is a staff nurse in a hospital. He works in the respiratory clinic and tests patients who have breathing problems. Robert's patients are external customers of the hospital. They come to the hospital for help with their health problems. George, who is 84, is one of Robert's patients.

Robert: "I'm going to test your lungs. This machine will check your lung capacity - that means how much air your lungs will hold. I want you to breathe into this tube. Just breathe normally."

George: "Do I have to blow into the tube?"

Robert: "No, just breathe the way you normally do at first. The machine will show us the volume of air you normally take in."

Robert: "OK, that's great. Now, I'd like you to take as deep a breath as you can and this time really blow hard into the tube. The doctor wants to check the difference between your normal breath and a deep breath."

Exercise

Think about how an elderly patient with breathing problems will feel. What do you think he requires from Robert?

Someone in George's position will be feeling tense and nervous. His problem may have suddenly occurred and he is fearful as to what it means. It may be a problem he has lived with for many years and he has put off doing something because he doesn't like hospitals. What he is looking for is reassurance and information. Robert can reassure him by simply treating him respectfully and he explains clearly what he wants George to do so that he understands. Keeping customers informed is an important part of good customer service, as this case study shows.

Identifying your internal customers

The people outside your organisation who buy or use the goods and services you supply are your external customers. They are the people for whom the organisation exists. Their requirements should shape what the organisation does and how it does it. However, you may never come into contact with these customers.

People who work in the accounts department, or in a factory assembling products, or on railway lines repairing tracks may not have any contact with the organisation's external customers. This doesn't mean they shouldn't be aware of what those customers want. Getting your suppliers paid on time ensures that customers get the goods or services they require. Assembling high quality, reliable products mean that customers get products that work. Repairing tracks in time means that train passengers get to work on time.

Even if you don't deal directly with external customers, you still have **internal customers**. Internal customers are the people who work within your organisation to whom you supply goods or services.

- ❖ Teams working in the accounts department supply services to the purchasing and sales departments, paying suppliers and invoicing customers.
- ❖ Teams working in a factory assembling products supply components and semi-finished products to other assembly teams, or to the warehouse where they are stored.
- ❖ Teams working repairing tracks on railway lines supply a service to train operating companies to supply train services to passengers.

As a team leader you supply services to your team, your manager and other team leaders. You supply leadership to your team, and information and support to your manager and other team leaders. They are your internal customers. By thinking of them as customers and taking account of their requirements of you, you can provide a better service to them. This makes it easier for them to do their job well and, together, you all give a better service to your organisation's external customers.

Exercise

What about your team's and your own *internal customers*? Who are they? They are the people inside the organisation who rely on the goods or services you and your team supply.

- ❖ Write down the main groups of internal customers your team serves.
- ❖ Beside each, write what you think they require from your team.

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Your customer's requirements



Good customer service is important to every workplace. The external customers are the reason your organisation exists and the internal customers make the organisation work well. To make sure that:

- ❖ external customers are satisfied with the goods and services your organisation supplies
- ❖ internal customers are satisfied with the services your team supplies and the service that you supply

you need to know what it is they require.

For external customers, this is something that your organisation's own marketing, customer relations or consultancy processes should identify. However, if you deal directly with customers, you may well be able to identify some of the most important requirements yourself.

With internal customers, the best way is to ask them and also to be alert to what they say and how they behave. If you have effective communication skills, you will be able to identify internal customers' requirements. The **BS2** sessions on collecting and analysing customer feedback can also help you identify customers' requirements.

Some customers may have great difficulty explaining what they require. This makes it even more important that you are alert to the signals they send out showing how they have responded to the service they have received.

Comprehension Check

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

A. List three different examples of external customers.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

B. List three different examples of internal customers.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

C. Complete each sentence. Circle the letter in front of the answer.

1. Customers who are outside an organisation are:
 - a. internal customers.
 - b. external customers.
 - c. service customers.

2. Customers who are inside an organisation are:
 - a. internal customers.
 - b. external customers.
 - c. proactive customers.

3. You can give your internal customers a good service if you:
 - a. give them what they expect.
 - b. do the best job you can.
 - c. ask them what they require.

Making Connections

Answer the questions following the case.

Craig is a Leading Firefighter with the County Fire Service. His Watch Commander has told him to take two crew members and teach a course in fire safety at the local community centre.

The Watch Commander explains that he has to meet a target for fire safety training and that he has had real problems organising this event. He asks Craig to get the names and the employing organisations of everyone who attends as he needs this to prove that he is meeting his targets.

The audience includes local council and school employees and people from local businesses. Craig and his team members show the audience how to perform a fire drill. They also explain how to use fire safety equipment such as fire extinguishers.

Who are Craig's:

- ❖ Internal customers?

- ❖ External customers?

- ❖ What do you think the people in the audience require from Craig and his crew?

Think and Apply

How well do you use the skills in this session?

- ❖ Do you know who your internal and external customers are?
- ❖ Do you know what your customers require?

1. Read the list of skills. Tick the boxes to show your strengths and weaknesses.				
<i>Skills</i>	<i>strengths <- - - -> 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
■ understanding who your internal and external customers are	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
■ identifying your customers' requirements	<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.)				