



# THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Nothing is more important than your business reputation, and the experience is what customers will remember most. In the age of the Internet, where products and services are increasingly commodified, the single biggest differentiator is your customer service.

Let the GUEST model guide the customer experience you provide:



Customer loyalty isn't something you earn once—it's something you must earn again and again, every day. Use mystery shopping to your advantage to learn not only about what your employees are doing and what they need to improve upon, but also who your customers really are and what they're looking for.



# GREET

Our favorite workflow acronym at The Brandt Group is GUEST. While this model has existed as a sales flowchart for quite a while now, we've tweaked it to amplify customer service over pure sales, which we believe will not only help win long-term loyalty from your customers, but also ensure lasting profitability.

As you've no doubt guessed, each letter stands for a step in the employee-customer interaction, and it makes for an easy mental checklist for your staff to follow.

To begin, the letter G stands for Greet. It's how your staff makes their introduction to your customers, that critical first impression that will likely define the way the rest of the conversation will go. After all, a negative introduction can sour the waters, so it's critical to get this part right. As Dale Carnegie says in his seminal classic, *How to Win Friends & Influence People*, if you want to make a good first impression, smile! "Actions speak louder than words," he writes, "and a smile says, 'I like you. You make me happy. I am glad to see you.'" A smile sets a tone of positivity, so that even an irate customer will feel compelled to ease up. This is important even on the phone. We like to say that callers can hear your smile: in other words, enthusiasm and positivity are transmitted even through a telephone conversation.

Dale Carnegie continues by explaining that psychologists have uncovered a positive side-effect to this prescriptive smiling: consciously smiling will lead to the emergence of genuine positivity on behalf of the smiler. In other words, smiling not only puts others at ease and makes them feel happier, it does the same in reverse.

But there's more to it than just a grin: your employees should enthusiastically welcome and thank the customer for choosing your business. Additionally, they also introduce themselves to personalize—indeed, humanize—the interaction as much as possible. (Getting the customer's name at this stage is also a big win!) Last, the employee should add that he or she is there to help. Take this example: "Hi! Welcome to Big Kahuna Burger. My name Brett. How can I help you?"

Just like how we instruct our shoppers to keep an eye (or ear) out for the smile, we also ask them to note how they were greeted. It's that important. The Greet may be the first step in the process, but it's as critical as the last

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# UNDERSTAND

The next letter in the acronym is U, which stands for Understand. This step is not only focused on learning about the customer's needs, but also has an important psychological component for the customer's sense of agency.

At its core, Understand is about listening. Everyone wants to be heard, which means employees have to let customers explain themselves first before anything else. That means allowing the

customer to finish his or her thoughts without trying to interrupt with pre-emptive solutions, all while making good eye contact to stay engaged. This is especially true if the customer is lodging a complaint or is venting about a poor experience. Allow him a moment to air his grievances. For many, this will be more cathartic than actually receiving some kind of compensation.

Of course, to understand what the customer needs, employees will also have to ask the right questions. They must listen carefully to what the customer puts in front of them, and then follow up with questions that will not only demonstrate engagement with what he or she is saying, but also help narrow down what solutions or products to offer. Critically, these should be open-ended questions that invite the customer to talk as much as possible. Taking a little extra time to uncover all the customer's needs will mitigate the chances of future dissatisfaction.

For example, a customer might come into a hot tub store believing he already knows which model he wants. (Maybe it was featured prominently in a print ad.) The employee should listen to the customer first, and then ask him how he'll use it. A series of questions might uncover that the customer actually likes to host friends every Saturday for a barbecue, and the hot tub he's wants only seats four. That could be a problem! Bringing something he hadn't considered to his attention demonstrates engagement and care for the customer's needs. That extra bit of conversation may lead to a bigger sale—and one the customer will be happier with long-term.

This is easily measured in a mystery shop. Not only do we ask point-blank whether the employees ask open-ended questions, we also ask our shoppers to recount what was specifically said to judge the effectiveness. Learning how employees interact with customers—especially when management isn't around to observe—is integral to development.

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# EXPLAIN

The next letter in the acronym is E, which stands for Explain. After listening to the customer and asking the right questions to uncover additional needs and confirm comprehension, it's time for the employee to do the talking.

To be effective, the employee needs to speak clearly and concisely. This is the easiest step to lose the customer in, especially when using heavy amounts of jargon or technical terms. Avoid those! It's an easy trap because employees live and breathe their industry through the forty-hour workweek, whereas the customer is more likely to be a novice. (Careful not to condescend at the same time, however. Many customers will do at least some research online ahead of time.)

The employee should frame the conversation in the ways your business can meet the customer's needs. This means addressing solutions directly to what was discussed in the Understand phase. Applicable sales and promotions should be mentioned. Take the opportunity to demonstrate the product or service to show exactly how it meets those needs—also present add-on items that will enrich or improve the customer experience.

In order to properly execute this step, employees must be trained and kept up-to-date, especially if your business is in a field where products are changing regularly. You shouldn't think of your staff as trainees only when they first start—training is a forever process, and even wily, old veterans need best-practices refreshers now and again. This is where mystery shopping comes in. Shops can reveal how well versed your employees are on everything from products and procedures to services and salesmanship. Mystery shops offer quantifiable answers to the questions you have about your staff.

Once the solutions have been laid out, allow the customer a chance to ask additional questions or raise objections.



# SECURE

The next letter in the acronym is S, which stands for Secure. After offering products or solutions that meet the expressed needs of the customer, the opportunity to secure the sale presents itself. Sometimes, this will be easy because the customer will have no questions or objections, and will be ready to make a purchase then and there. Often, however, there will be pushback or more questions of some kind. It's important to not get flustered and to keep the conversation casual and friendly when this happens. If the customer has objections, like price concerns or whether a product or service meets all his or her needs, listen earnestly. To effectively address those objections, the employee must make sure he or she understands exactly what the customer is saying.

Price is the most common objection anyone working in sales will face—by far. But before retreating to cheaper alternatives or sacrificing profit with pack-ins or other freebies, employees should make sure they reinforce the value of the product. Done correctly, this will be executed during the earlier Explain stage, when a product or service is described, but a reminder at this point can be very helpful, especially if the employee frames it specifically to what the customer has already expressed. Aspects like quality, longevity, features, and more should be underscored, to be sure, but how all these values tie in with the customer's expressed needs is even more critical. This will demonstrate that the employee is paying attention and really cares about the customer's needs. As we mentioned in the overview for Understand, everyone wants to be heard and—by extension—understood.

Finally, closing language should be used: employees must ask for the sale before the end of the conversation. One school of thought suggests that sellers should assume the sale and move to ring up or place the order of the customer without asking. This is presumptive, however, and it's better to casually move in that direction without being so abrupt or direct. (The ABCs of sales, Always Be Closing, as punctuated in Glengarry Glen Ross, applies, but use a soft touch.) Instead, a line like, "Sounds like we found the right item for you. Are you ready to check out?" or "Are you ready to get started?" are safer and more respectful. Regardless, employees should never fear being told no; as Nora Roberts wrote, "If you don't ask, the answer will always be no."



# THANK

Finishing our overview of the GUEST model, we move from Secure to Thank. The customer has been greeted, his needs understood, the products or services explained, and the objections secured; the time to conclude the experience has arrived. At its core, Thank is about expressing gratitude to the customer for taking the time to consider your business—there are a lot of other choices, don't forget. But there's more to this stage than merely saying, "Thanks for stopping by!" and then walking him to the door.

As important as saying thank you is, committing to follow up with customers is even more so. Nothing expresses appreciation to customers as much as your desire to establish a line of a communication, to keep an open-ended relationship with them. This applies whether a transaction has concluded or not: for a successful sale, this means a follow-up call to the customer to confirm his satisfaction and to intercept any problems before they escalate. But even when the customer doesn't buy (yet), a follow-up reminds him about your business before it disappears into background noise of his life. Tell him you want his business. Whether this is a phone call, an email, or a handwritten note, the gesture will be noticed and appreciated. This lays the groundwork for long-term customer loyalty, which not only helps to ensure that sale, but future ones as well.

This concludes our GUEST overview: from Greet, to Understand, to Explain, to Secure, and to Thank. We hope that you found these posts insightful for your business's customer service and sales process. As with everything we do, this process is highly customizable and can easily be custom-tailored to your business.

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# LOYALTY

Customer acquisition is far more expensive than retention. Despite this universally understood fact, some industries still cling to new-customer deals that can alienate existing clients. Large mobile telephone and cable companies often do this, making many wonder, “Why don’t you reward your loyal customers?”

Of course, telephone and cable companies are notorious for having poor customer service anyway, so their stubbornness on the matter shouldn’t surprise any of us. We must bear in mind, however, that any business that competes primarily on price, especially where a commodity product or service is concerned, is bound to deal with a lot of customer churn and also sacrifice quality in some way, especially in the customer experience. In order for any small business to compete with large companies that offset poor margins with volume, it must focus on the one thing these companies rarely succeeded at: providing the best customer service.

In order to do that, a business should focus on finding out who its guests are, what they want, and how this compares to the competition. In other words, a business needs to take steps to demonstrate that it cares about its customers.

To learn about the first two items, a customer survey can be hugely beneficial. Not only will you learn about what your customers like and don’t, you’ll also demonstrate to them that you’re listening, that you want their feedback. More than anything else, when dealing with potential discontent, customers want to feel like they’re being heard. It’s amazing how much that feeling can contribute to overall customer satisfaction.

In order to compare your business to the competition, competitive mystery shopping is one of the greatest tools your company can employ. In this kind of mystery shop, a shopper will go to both locations and pose as a normal customer to gauge everything from service to signage to cleanliness. You’ll then receive a report comparing and contrasting the two, giving you an idea of what your competition is doing well—and even what they’re not, so you know what mistakes to avoid. By learning about your customers as well as your competition, you’ll have the data necessary to craft the best experiences—ones that feel tailored to and respectful of each customer. A business that’s attentive to its customers, a business that cares about its customers, will beat out the commodified, cookie-cutter experiences that many large corporations offer.

Reach out to us at The Brandt Group today and we’ll help you tailor the right experience for your customers. Through mystery shopping, you’ll be able monitor your sales and customer service processes, as well as get feedback on everything from your business’s visual presentation to the quality of your products. Establishing and testing those standards will help to ensure ongoing profitability and success. We can’t wait to work with you!

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