Customer Service Guide

Tips and guidelines for all ASD employees
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Is that a frozen frog in my green beans?

Within hours of a woman experiencing bad customer service at a big box retail store, the blogosphere was in a twitter over the injustices she had suffered at the company’s hands. YouTube videos quickly made the company the butt of jokes nationwide, but you can be sure no one at the company was laughing. After all, who wants to shop (or work) at a store where everyone knows the “customer service solution” to finding a frozen frog in a purchased bag of green beans is to give the customer a dollar-off coupon for the next purchase? In this dramatic instance, one customer service failure had the ability to damage the reputation of a national chain and affect the morale of its employees.

Had the company put the customer first, this incident wouldn’t have turned into a fiasco splashed across the Internet.

We all know that customer service is important. We all know that we should be pleasant and helpful to those with whom we interact. This guide is designed to give you practical tips on customer service to help bring your customer service skills to the next level. In doing so, you’ll not only help maintain the good reputation of ASD, you’ll help to make your job less stressful.

**Question:** Who are your customers?

**Answer:**
- a) parents
- b) students
- c) taxpayers/citizens
- d) co-workers
- e) all of the above

Hopefully, you said e) all of the above. Without internal teamwork, promoted by excellent internal customer service, an organization struggles to provide external customer service.
Customer service is everyone’s job at ASD whether or not you interact with the public.

The aspirations and requirements for educating students in today’s world are vastly different than they were a decade or more ago.

In order to ensure we are providing the best education possible to our students, we must have a shared vision with a strategic focus.

That’s why we created Destination 2020, the district’s comprehensive, multi-year plan to increase student achievement. It outlines where we want to be and provides a roadmap to help us get there.

This plan will shape educational opportunities around the community’s ever-evolving needs and build upon the momentum of the last several years.

Framework for Success

Destination 2020’s framework for success is built around four strategies: focusing on students, investing in staff, engaging the community and strengthening our services.

Customer service is woven into each of these strategies that build our framework for success and all district staff are expected to provide excellent service.

We are focusing on these strategies, determining what works well and adjusting what isn’t to ensure every student achieves at least one year’s academic growth each year.
Creating a culture of customer service

“Customer service is not a department, it’s an attitude.”
– Anonymous

Every parent and community member should feel comfortable and welcome at our schools.

The difference in providing good customer service to outstanding customer service is understanding what customers want and need.

• Everyone wants to feel welcome and important. Visitors and co-workers want answers and resolutions to their problems and requests.

• People want to be understood—to feel that their opinions, wants and needs are worth listening to and acting upon. In situations where it is not possible to provide your customers with what they want, how you treat them while trying to solve their issue will go a long way toward how they perceive customer service at your workplace.

“Always treat people the way you want to be treated.”
Heather Philp, supervisor
The ABCs of excellent customer service include:

A. Appearance—yours and your workplace
B. Behavior—how you handle conflict
C. Communication—written, oral and electronic

How you say what you say is often the most meaningful part of your communication. Body language and tone of voice can completely change the meaning of your words. In fact, most of your communication is non-verbal, which is why email should not be used to solve emotional, contentious or confrontational issues.

Our brains are wired to quickly scan our environment and determine whether it is safe or dangerous. This means your reputation, the reputation of your school or department and the reputation of ASD hinge on the first few seconds of your interaction.

Customer service attributes

1. A passion for taking care of coworkers, students, parents and the community.
2. A willingness to be flexible.
3. A work ethic based on dedication to ASD and its mission.
4. An eagerness to learn.
5. Self-motivation and goal-oriented.
6. Excellent communication skills.

"Never judge a book by its cover. Not everybody is dealt the same deck of cards but we all deserve the same treatment."

—Chemene Breiner, administrative assistant
Customer service challenges

1. Simultaneously managing the customer’s experience and the district’s internal processes.
2. Being on the firing line and encountering angry customers when things go wrong.
3. Managing time by prioritizing and planning work despite a fast-paced, sometimes turbulent work environment.
4. Coordinating work with others throughout the district in order to meet the customer’s needs.
5. Continually learning about new policies, services and internal procedures despite time constraints or a lack of available training or coaching.

Tips for outstanding customer service

Friendliness
Consider the 15-5 rule for interacting in hallways: Make eye contact—acknowledge any customer at 15 feet. At 5 feet, offer a smile and extend a friendly greeting. Be aware of your body language, especially when you are tired, stressed or are otherwise having a bad day.

Understanding and empathy
Sometimes, it’s not what you say, but how you say it. Verbally acknowledging what the person is going through will help break down barriers and defuse emotions.

Fairness
When welcoming and professionally-dressed staff greet all visitors promptly and quickly ask to offer assistance, customers feel that they will be treated justly and impartially.
Information and communication

Take a tour of your facility through the eyes of your customers and see if you are sending the right messages. Would you want to enroll your child at your school, or recommend that a friend apply for a job at your work site? If not, start a dialogue about how you can improve. Here are some items to think about:

On the outside, does your school/workplace have:

- Clearly marked visitor parking spaces near the front door?
- Well-kept grounds free of trash and debris?
- Is your school’s reader board up-to-date and accurate?
- Plainly marked entrances, particularly the main door?
- Do you have posted instructions on how to use entrance buzzers?
- A clean and appealing front entrance/lobby area?
- A welcome sign that clearly directs visitors to the main office?
- Attractive, colorful displays of student achievement? (for schools)

On the inside, does your school/workplace have:

- A clean and tidy front office?
- Reading material about the school/workplace for visitors?
- Welcoming and professionally dressed staff who greet all visitors promptly and quickly ask to offer assistance?
- Visitor badges?
- Promptly (within three rings) and professionally answered telephones?
- A well-informed staff with up-to-date information readily accessible?

“It’s important to understand that everyone is different and handles situations differently.”
—Erin Hall, teacher
Conversation and telephone tips

**Be prepared:**
- Use active listening, a structured form of listening and responding that focuses on the speaker. Focus on what the speaker is saying instead of thinking of a response to what is being said.
- Repeat in your own words, what you think the speaker has said.
- You don’t have to agree with the speaker—you simply repeat what you heard the speaker say. This allows the speaker to know that they’ve been heard and understood, or, allows them to try and better explain what they mean.
- Do not interrupt them.

**Answering the phone:**
- Check your voicemail message and main voicemail system. Make sure your voicemail message isn’t too long, fast or robotic. Let the caller know what to do if they have an immediate concern. Make sure the “Push Zero for Operator” option in your workplace voicemail system comes early in the message. Call yourself or your organization to hear how you sound to others.
- Check your voicemail regularly.
- Answer calls by the second or third ring, if possible.
- Be aware of how fast or loud you are speaking.
- Smile: it comes through, just like a frown. Breathe and focus. Speak clearly and calmly. You may have just answered a question for the umpteenth time, and you may be on deadline, but this is your caller’s initial contact with you.

“Always acknowledge the customer’s concern and be present for that individual.”
Glen Nielsen, executive director
• Project a tone that is attentive and respectful.
• Greet the caller and identify yourself and the school/location. Ask how you can assist the caller. **Example:** “Taku Elementary, this is Mary. How may I help you?”

**NEVER:**
• Eat, drink or chew gum while on the phone.
• Leave an open line. Instead, place the caller on hold and check back with the caller frequently – every 30-45 seconds.

**During the conversation:**
• Speak clearly and distinctly.
• Focus your full attention on the caller and the conversation.
• Listen carefully so you understand exactly what the call is about.
• Forward calls to personnel that are available at the time.
• Take messages by promising the caller the information will be delivered. Read back what you’ve written to be sure the message is correct.
• End the conversation politely. **Example:** “Thank you for calling.”

**When the requested person is unavailable:**
• If the person is in a conference, observing in a classroom or out of the building at a meeting, it is appropriate to say so. This gives the caller a timeframe to understand how long it may take to get a call back if he/she is the only one who can answer the question.
• If the person is away for an extended period of time, offer the

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“Smile when you answer the phone, the inflection of your voice will translate to the caller.”

— Cassie Jeremias, executive secretary
caller a chance to talk with someone who is handling matters while the person is away.

**Phrases to avoid:**

“I don’t know.”

*Try saying:* “That is a good question; let me find out for you,” or offer to connect the caller with someone who can provide the answer. If a call involves research, assure the person you will call back by a certain time.

“I/we can’t do that.”

*Instead:* “This is what I/we can do.”

“You’ll have to …”

*Instead:* “You can...” or “You may...” or “Here’s how we can help you.”

“Just a second.”

*Instead:* Give a more honest estimate of how long it will take you and/or let the caller know what you are doing.

“No,” or “We can’t do that.”

*Instead:* Find a way to state the situation positively, “I want to help find a solution.” Dismissing an unhappy customer with “Sorry, that’s our policy,” is not providing excellent service. Try instead to let the person know what is possible. “Here’s what we can do.” You may need to transfer the caller to a supervisor when there is no solution to the complaint, such as making changes to the school calendar. Let them know you understand their concern and that you can either transfer them to a higher authority, or note the concern and pass it on.

“Try not to say ‘I don’t know.’ If you do not have the answer, take the caller’s name and number and search for the correct person or department.”

Charles Hoff, tech support
When the caller is upset, a customer service star LEAPS into action:

L - Listen; allow the caller to express his or her frustration.
E - Empathize without interrupting; acknowledge the person’s feelings.
A - Apologize without taking or laying blame. Put yourself in their shoes. Say, “I understand, I’d be unhappy too if that happened to me.” Or say, “I’m sorry that happened.”
P - (Be) Positive. Asking non-threatening questions helps callers to calm down and think about the facts of the situation.
S - Solve; suggest solutions that you can agree on, or ask how you can help.

Make sure to offer the caller a higher authority:
Providing alternatives empowers callers. It gives them the feeling they are choosing the solution.

Don’t overreact:
Especially if the caller starts pushing your buttons with lines like: “I want to talk to someone who knows something.”

Do not blame anyone:
Not the caller, yourself, or someone on your staff – even if you know who is to blame for a problem. This information should not be shared with the caller.

Paraphrase the caller’s comments:
Ask questions if you do not understand the information being presented to you. Restate the problem as you understand it.

Remember:
A positive attitude is the most important asset you have. Avoid argument and criticism.

“Empathize with their concern. Empathy goes a long way.”
Danny Myrick, bus route scheduler
Particularly difficult situations

If the caller is swearing or using offensive language:

• Interrupt immediately and assure them you want to help.
• Address the language directly and keep control. Say in a calm tone of voice, “Excuse me, I want to help, but I’m not able to handle your abusive language.” Then follow up with questions to identify the problem.
• If the offensive language continues, remain calm and polite while telling the caller you will have to hang up. Then hang up the phone, gently. Immediately tell your supervisor about the incident.

If the visitor appears physically hostile or aggressive:

• Use common sense and call 911 if the person presents an imminent danger. It’s a good idea to work out with your supervisor how to handle particularly thorny interactions ahead of time. Be sure to know what to do if your supervisor is away at the time of a future situation.
• Remain calm but don’t remain alone, always have a witness. Don’t hesitate to call your School Resource Officer or your supervisor.
• Ask the person to sit down. Repeat that you want to help and find a solution, but that you aren’t able to help unless you can have a civil discussion. Be aware of your surroundings. If you suspect the visitor is “playing to an audience,” try removing the audience but keep your witness.
• You may need to involve your supervisor, especially if you find yourself unable to handle the situation in a calm, detached manner or the hostility escalates.
**Negative coworkers and internal customer service**

One person can poison an entire office, affecting staff morale and customer service alike.

- Stress can negatively affect health. According to the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, health care costs are nearly 50 percent greater for employees reporting high levels of stress.
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health cites studies that show job stress is on the rise. One-quarter of employees say their job is their number one stressor.
- According to the NIOSH, lack of support or help from coworkers and supervisors are some of the leading causes of job stress.

There are varying degrees of difficult situations and personalities. Sometimes, coworkers and situations are annoying and are best ignored. Difficult people and situations require immediate action that doesn’t involve you becoming part of the problem.

Toxic people and situations may require additional assistance, such as elevating the concern to a supervisor or the Human Resources Department.

**Consider these tips for dealing with difficult people:**

- Make sure you’re not part of the problem. Taking responsibility for your part in inter-office conflict will give you the high ground when dealing with a difficult coworker.
- Protect and promote your reputation by being courteous, delivering on your promises and avoiding office gossip.
- Try to find common ground. Practice active listening. Consider including a witness in conflict resolution.
• Avoid becoming defensive. Remain calm and professional. State your position clearly and politely, but firmly. Agree to disagree.

**Dress to impress**

Don’t underestimate the power of first impressions. People make some pretty amazing assumptions about professional credibility and performance based on personal appearance. When employees dress professionally, they usually feel more self-confident and assured. School employees and teachers should consider projecting a professional image that models positive dress and grooming for students.

• Allergies, asthma and sensitivities to fragrances are growing problems. Many people experience severe headaches and other symptoms with exposure to fragrance. Many of the soaps and shampoos we use already contain fragrance, so consider not applying an additional layer at the office. If you do wear a fragrance, ensure that it is applied lightly enough not to exceed your personal space. In other words, it is not detectable by another in your close vicinity.

• Select apparel, jewelry and hairstyles that are professional and appropriate to your workplace. How you look should not distract from your on-the-job performance.
Do you have them at “hello?”

When it comes to interpersonal communications, How do you measure up?
Conduct the following self evaluation with a co-worker or supervisor to see where you may want to hone your interpersonal skills. Rate yourself from 1 to 10, with 10 being the best score you could imagine.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>What I think (from 1-10)</th>
<th>Someone else’s score</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eye contact/pleasant tone of voice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to conceal frustration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Willingness to offer apology when it isn’t my fault</td>
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<td>Willingness to offer apology when it is my fault</td>
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<td>Ability to handle unreasonable complaints</td>
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<td>Accessibility</td>
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<td>Willingness to make accommodations</td>
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<td>Indirect communication</td>
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<td>(Body language)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Response to criticism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total score (out of 100 points)</strong></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**How’d you do?**

90-100 points  Congratulations. Consider mentoring others at your workplace.
80-89 points   Not bad. Consider seeking out additional customer service material, or contact the Communications Department for more information and retake the test.
Below 79 points Not good, but thank you for your honesty and courage in taking the self-evaluation. Consider working with your supervisor to devise a plan to improve your interpersonal communications.
Please consider using these cards near your work station or to help new employees in your school or department.

**Answering the phone:**

- Assume a “telephone” voice. Smile, it comes through, just like a frown. Breathe. Speak clearly and calmly. You may have just answered a question for the umpteenth time, but this is your next caller’s initial contact with you.
- Greet the caller and identify yourself and the school/ location, and ask how you can assist the caller. Example: “Taku Elementary, this is Mary. How may I help you?”

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- If the offensive language continues, remain calm and polite while telling the caller you will have to hang up. Then hang up the phone, gently. Notify supervisor immediately.
ASD Statement of Nondiscrimination

The board is committed to an environment of nondiscrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, economic status, union affiliation, disability or other human differences. No person shall be excluded from participation in, or denied the benefits of, any academic or extracurricular program or educational opportunity or service offered by the district. The district will comply with the applicable statutes, regulations and executive orders adopted by federal, state and municipal agencies. The district notes the concurrent applicability of the Individuals with Disabilities Act, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the relevant disability provisions of Alaska law.

Inquiries or complaints may be addressed to the district’s Equal Employment Opportunity executive director, who also serves as the Title IX and ADA/ADAAA coordinator, ASD Education Center, 5530 E. Northern Lights Blvd, Anchorage, AK 99504-3135, (907) 742-4132, or to any of the following external agencies: Alaska State Commission for Human Rights, Anchorage Equal Rights Commission, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the Director of the Office for Civil Rights-U.S. Department of Education or Office of Civil Rights-U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
Please provide us with feedback on your experiences with customer service in the district by contacting the Communications Department at 742-4153.