



# Spa Customer Service: Why It Is More Important Today Than Ever!

by Douglas Preston, L.E.

**A**lthough customer service is a common term, what does it mean to those for whom it is intended? Despite the numerous definitions of what customer service is, it is not a claim inside a salon or spa brochure, a business philosophy, meeting the customer's minimum expectations, simply serving a customer, or putting the business' and employees' interests first.

In the United States, the tradition of customer-oriented service has been eroding for many years. Beginning with self-serve gas stations in the 1970s, automated bank tellers (ATMs), and big box discount retailers, the elimination of customer service in sales and certain services has been an expanding trend. While these measures were first initiated to save consumers money as sales labor was reduced, today, there is almost no relationship between product cost and customer service. As a result, there are now several generations of workers with little experience or memory of excellent service skills. Furthermore, after successive stretches of strong, national, economic growth, jobs had become so plentiful that employers found it impossible to keep employees in service positions requiring more than the most minimal effort and attention to detail. Furthering this customer service decline has been a generation of young workers who have been protected by parents from the discomforts of disapproval. These workers were not accustomed to or open to the prospect of dealing with people who may see them as responsible for a company's failings. In other words, an employee is not going to allow a client make them feel badly.

During a recent visit to a gardening supply store, I asked an attendant if they had a particular soil.

"We're out," she said.

Without even looking my direction, she continued to water plants. On another occasion, I contacted a restaurant to ask about reservations for a particular evening.

"That night is booked," was the short, chilly response to my question.

Neither situation was accompanied with a "We're sorry," "Let me see if we have some coming in," or anything else suggesting the least bit of interest in what my experience was as a customer attempting to buy from these businesses. These customer service representatives demonstrated no consideration for the feelings of the person they were disappointing.

## The Basics of Customer Service

Customer service in the skin care industry begins by knowing how to satisfy the baseline needs of clients who walk in the door of the spa and continues beyond the call of duty when a situation calls for it. Great customer service involves observation and sympathetic and sincere action when problem solving is required. A truly client-oriented spa will feature employees who can anticipate potential mishaps between the company and its clients and be fully prepared to intervene without confusion or defensiveness. For this to happen, a business must invest in recruiting employees who have the highest potential to provide excellent customer service, providing thorough customer service training (and recurrent training) with clearly-established expectations for all employees, and ensuring an excellent and consistent role modeling and management team.

While some larger, independent spas may have well-developed customer service training programs, the majority of spas (medium or small) have little, if any, customer service training or highly-skilled management. Is it any wonder why so many of these businesses struggle financially and experience heavy employee turnover when client needs are minimally met or often not met at all?

Boiled down to basics, customer service can be properly defined as caring for the emotional well-being of those being served. Emotional well-being is so important because in the final analysis, when a client evaluates whether or not they will want to do business with the spa again, it is their feeling or emotional experience about the spa that will be the determining factor.

## Customer Service Examples

The following examples demonstrate how a disappointment can prove better than basic satisfaction when it comes to customer service.



A) A new client arrives at a spa for a facial treatment. Upon arrival, she notices that the front desk assistant is efficient and not unfriendly, but not particularly personable either. The client is asked to take a seat. The aesthetician arrives and greets the client, leads her to the treatment room, and proceeds to perform a routine facial. When finished, the aesthetician then thanks the client and sends her back to the front desk to check out. The client is billed and leaves the spa.

B) A new client arrives for a facial treatment and the front desk assistant informs the client that the aesthetician scheduled to perform her treatment is running a little late. "Hello Kate, my name is Jennifer. Welcome to The Spa. I want to apologize because Sara is just a few minutes behind schedule as her last client had a small emergency causing her to arrive a few minutes late. May I get you some coffee or tea while I check with Sara to get an update on her timing? We really regret causing you any delay. I am certain it will not be long." The front desk assistant provides Kate with a drink and attempts to engage her. "Since I know this is your first time here, are there any questions I can answer for you about the spa? Did you manage to find parking easily? Please relax and we will take very good care of you today!"

Even though the new client was made to wait in example B, her experience of care and customer importance could outweigh the fact that her appointment was delayed. It might also end up being even more satisfying on a personal level than the on-time, but sterile, treatment in example A.

## Positive Feelings

Great customer service is all about positive feelings. Whether in a restaurant, dental office, bank, or gardening supply store, it is about putting the customer's feelings first, above all else, and doing whatever it takes to send them away from the business with a glowing feeling and appealing story. A great story is client referral gold for the word-of-mouth-dependent business or practitioner.



Great customer service can come in totally unexpected ways and can sometimes reflect an individual employee's effort rather than a specific company policy. For instance, a hotel bellman in California, after bringing my luggage into my room, asked me if there was anything else I needed. I laughed and said (facetiously), "Yes, I realized as soon as I arrived here that I forgot to pack deodorant!"

"No problem," he casually replied, "I can walk right over to the store and get you some. What kind do you use?"

Shocked, I insisted that his gesture was too much to ask.

"I'm happy to do it. Besides, I can use the walk," he responded.

The bellman went to the store, bought my personal brand of deodorant, and took payment for the product but did not accept a tip. That was 11 years ago and I still have not forgotten that exceptional customer service.

I once took a small group of friends to a local sushi restaurant for dinner. As we arrived 20 minutes before the posted closing hours, a distressed waiter met us at the door.

"Um, I think we're closed," he said as he looked over his shoulder at the sushi chef behind the bar.

"Your sign says that you're open until 9:00 and it is 8:40 now. Are you open until 9:00 or not?" I asked.

Again, the waiter looked back to the sushi chef who shook his head in indication that he did not want any more customers that evening.

"Uh, I guess we're not tonight," was the answer. "We'll be here again tomorrow at 4:00," the waiter remarked.

"But, we won't," I responded.

Customer service is not turning visitors away during posted business hours unless there is a true emergency. If you want to close at 8:40, then change your sign. I have never returned to that sushi restaurant and neither have my friends.

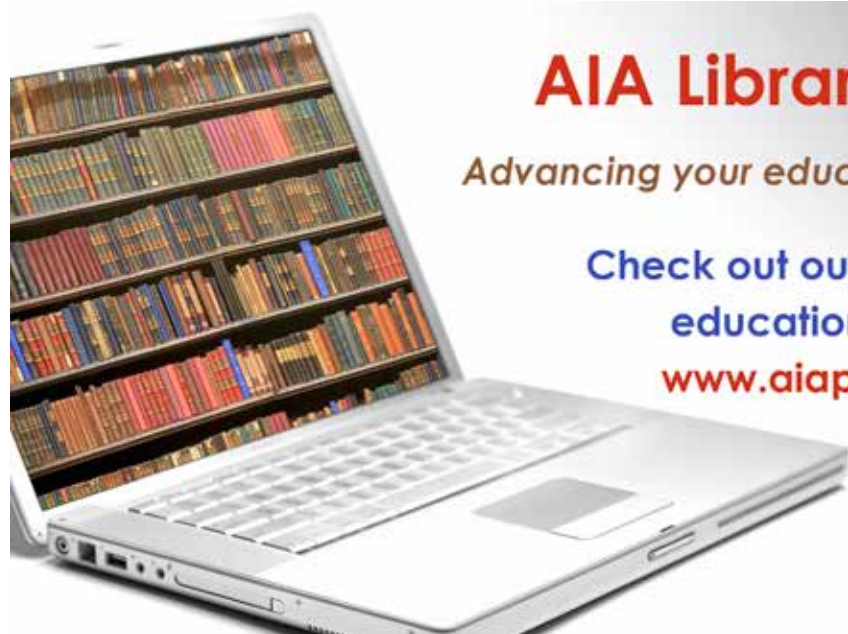
Clients do not care much about mission statements, awards, how many years a business has been operating, or glossy advertising. They care about themselves, how they are treated, and if they are appreciated and made to feel like someone special and valued.

Caring personal touches not only brighten the image of a business in the eyes of clients, but also send a socially-reassuring message to the world. In other words, what touches one person can affect many.

### Customer Service Tips

The following examples exhibit how a spa can easily improve customer service performance without adding extra cost or personnel.

Ask a caller for their name early in the call and give them one in return. This gesture makes the call a conversation between two familiar people rather than two strangers. Since a spa is supposed to be about personal services, why wait until the caller agrees to make an ap-



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Another amazing example I encountered of above and beyond customer service was while I was staying at a hotel. Realizing that I had not received copies of my presentation for a speech I was giving that day, I asked a hotel valet if they had a business center available.

"We do," he said, "but unfortunately it is already closed for the day."

Seeing my distress he asked me what I needed. I told him about the copies and he asked me how many I needed. He then took my file folder and drove the hotel shuttle van to a copy store, got the number of copies I requested, and brought them back to me, asking only for the cost of the copying.



pointment before finding out who they are? Although very few service businesses do this, it makes a powerful and positive impression on a new client.

When handling a service complaint, pick up paper and a pen and walk to the client's side of the front desk. This move reduces the protective stance between the client and employee and demonstrates a willingness to

deal with the problem. Allow the client to fully express the problem without interruption. Proceed by asking the client what can be done to make them feel better. Do not just toss out a free service or discount as this does nothing to resolve the client's injured feelings. It is often found that the mere act of venting a problem is enough to resolve the matter; what the client usually will want is far less than the full refund or a future service free of charge.

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Show some flexibility for the clients every now and then by staying a little later to accommodate a treatment request. Professionals can perform a service on a normal day off or take a client call when they are away from the spa; make exceptions when exceptions can be made. These motions are greatly appreciated by clients and prove the professional's dedication to the industry.

Accept product returns immediately without making the client feel guilty. If the recommendation work is sound, product returns will rarely happen and will be worth the cost in terms of client retention. For example, if a client returns a full regimen because she experienced flaking skin, the professional should instantly offer to refund the purchase and provide samples of new products.

Never make the client feel sorry about the professional work that has been done for them. Sharing hardships, troubles, or job complaints is a serious disservice to clients who come to the professional for relief from all that is going on in their own lives.

Provide small client conveniences. By thinking of things from the client's perspective, professionals can have small conveniences available, such as cell phone chargers, that will make a huge difference in someone's day and make the spa a hero!

Consistency is everything. If the spa is in the habit of thanking clients as they leave after their services, then be

sure to do it every single time. It may seem like a small thing, but one day, when a client leaves without an expected expression of gratitude, that small gesture can have a profound effect on their feeling of being appreciated. The spa does not want to appear uneven in service, quality, or communication.

Understanding and providing exceptional customer service is as easy as professionals asking themselves how they would know it if they saw or experienced it at their business. Then, all they need to do is deliver on those concepts. Professionals will find that even in their own idea of great service, it really requires little more than careful attention and concern for the feelings of the clients to achieve. ➡



*Douglas Preston, president of Preston Beauty Professional, has a career that spans 33 years in professional aesthetics, education, and skin care career mentoring. His business articles appear in DERMASCOPE Magazine, Spa Management Journal, and others. He is a past president of Aesthetics International Association and a former committee chairman for The Day Spa Association. Preston has started and operated award-winning day spas, trains spa and skin care professionals internationally, and is a featured speaker at numerous spa and skin care trade events.*

