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Customer Care

Frank Atkinson



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ISBN 978-87-7681-759-6

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Preface

This book has been written to help you become more successful in sales.

The author of this publication is Frank Atkinson, founder and Managing Director of the Sales Training Consultancy. His company has trained many thousands of salespeople throughout the world since it was formed in 1989.

As National Sales Training Director for BUPA Health Insurance, prior to setting up his company, Frank was responsible for training and developing one of the most successful sales teams in Europe.

The Sales Training Consultancy has one of the most visited sales training websites in the world. www.salestraining.co.uk and his company has an impressive worldwide client list.

Frank employs a team of highly experienced trainers who train and develop salespeople in all industries to sell more and to sell more profitably. His courses are highly motivational and fun.

In this book Frank brings his wide range of experience and expertise into play giving simple, practical and tested advice on sales and selling.



Customer care

Your goals for this book on customer care are to understand why customer service is more important than ever and how it could transform your business if you are really serious about delivering excellent customer care

In this book we will look at what it is, why it is important and how to go about putting a programme into place.

1. Why customer care is important

Think of companies and organisations that give great customer service. We all have our favourites and some may disagree about one of your choices because they have had a bad experience.

We have a small delicatessen in my home town of York with 3 employees. The service is second to none. If you see something you haven't tried before they will give you a taste. If they don't have what you want they will get some and they are unfailingly friendly and helpful.

As companies grow it becomes harder to deliver consistently high levels of service. Again, one of my favourites is the food retailer Prêt à Manger. My personal experience with them is that they major on freshness and helpful and friendly staff and have very high standards of hygiene and cleanliness. Other companies that consistently win customer service awards are retailers Waitrose and John Lewis.

Organisations don't go to all this effort because it is a nice thing to do. They do it because it increases sales, customer loyalty and makes more profit in the long term.

Customer care can be defined as:

The process of delivering high quality service to internal and external customers. Customer care results in high levels of customer satisfaction leading to long-term 'buying' relationships between suppliers and customers.

Organisations that provide a high standard of customer care tend to have the following characteristics.

- High quality products or services that represent value for money.
- A high standard of after-sales service.
- Friendly and helpful staff who are well trained and knowledgeable.
- A positive response to customer enquiries and demands.
- A 'can do' rather than a 'can't do' approach.
- A regular appraisal of the service they provide in order to improve that service.
- The ability to be self-critical in a positive way.

1 Why customer care is important

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1.1 'The call centre experience'

We are all customers. We shop, we bank we buy goods and services from a wide range of organisations and we all have an opinion about service. In recent years technology has enabled large organisations to centralise and communication is increasingly carried out over the phone or by e-mail.

When we have a problem, we want to deal with someone who is honest, friendly, reliable, knowledgeable, and trustworthy can solve our problem quickly. When asked, most people rate service more highly than the actual product and price, yet our day to day experience with Utility companies, Banks and other large organisations is often poor if not downright criminal.

When was the last time you rang a call centre? How happy were you with the service you got?

Things I hate about call centres:

- They make you wait before talking to you
- They make you choose from options before talking to you
- They play music while you are waiting
- They try to direct you to their website to solve your problem because it saves them money
- They make it difficult to sort your problem out
- They tell you how important you are but don't treat you as if they mean it. If you were that important they would employ more staff
- You never talk to the same person twice
- They insist you repeat information unnecessarily
- They don't employ enough staff, or the staff they do employ are based abroad and don't always have good local knowledge
- They don't care!

But it's not just call centres. People in retail environments are often rude and unhelpful, not because they are bad people but they are often poorly trained, badly managed and working under pressure.

Yet if you listen to the people at the top of these organisations they regularly come out with phrases like "We are totally customer focused" and "Our people are our greatest asset."

Not true. To deliver excellent customer care needs commitment from the top of the organisation, investment in training and equipment and proper management on an ongoing basis. It also requires feedback from the poor customers and staff who are experiencing the service and suffering at the coal face.

Some reasons why customer care is important were highlighted in a survey carried out by the CBI (Confederation of British Industry) in 2009. Their main conclusions were:

- Only 1 customer in 10 with grounds for complaint actually does so.
- Those customers who experience problems tell between 8 and 15 people about the problems, whether or not they have formally complained.
- 9 out of 10 people who complain and have a problem that is not dealt with satisfactorily will never buy again from that supplier, or do so as a last resort.
- 9 out of 10 people who complain and have a problem that is dealt with satisfactorily will buy again from that supplier. In fact, they rate the supplier higher than if the problem never occurred in the first place
- It costs 5 times more to attract a new customer than to keep an existing one.

1.2 Who is responsible for customer care?

Customer care is everybody's responsibility. It begins with the person who is most senior, say the Managing Director, making a strategic decision that customer care is good for the business and is going to be embedded into the culture of the organisation at all levels.

Many organisations flirt with customer care. They will often buy in customer care training but restrict it to, say, Supervisors and members of staff, but leave out Managers and Directors and even departments that aren't regarded as customer facing such as accounts, or warehousing.

This is the wrong way to go about it.

If you look at it this way everyone in the organisation can potentially upset customers and get in the way of providing excellent customer care.

The responsibility of the senior person in the organisation is to give strong leadership and explain that customer care is at the heart of decision making for the future. It is also important to publicly state why customer care is so important and lay out ground rules that all members of staff understand.

The Ritz Carlton Hotel Group has 73 hotels worldwide and employs 38,000 people. They are fanatical about giving great service. Here is how they explain their beliefs to their staff.

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We pledge to provide the finest personal service and facilities for our guests who will always enjoy a warm, relaxed, yet refined ambience.

The Ritz-Carlton experience enlivens the senses, instils well-being, and fulfils even the unexpressed wishes and needs of our guests.

Motto

At The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, L.L.C., “We are Ladies and Gentlemen serving Ladies and Gentlemen.” This motto exemplifies the anticipatory service provided by all staff members.

Three Steps Of Service

1. A warm and sincere greeting. Use the guest’s name.
2. Anticipation and fulfilment of each guest’s needs.
3. Fond farewell. Give a warm good-bye and use the guest’s name.

Service Values: I Am Proud To Be Ritz-Carlton

1. I build strong relationships and create Ritz-Carlton guests for life.
2. I am always responsive to the expressed and unexpressed wishes and needs of our guests.
3. I am empowered to create unique, memorable and personal experiences for our guests.
4. I understand my role in achieving the Key Success Factors, embracing Community Footprints and creating The Ritz-Carlton Mystique.
5. I continuously seek opportunities to innovate and improve The Ritz-Carlton experience.
6. I own and immediately resolve guest problems.
7. I create a work environment of teamwork and lateral service so that the needs of our guests and each other are met.
8. I have the opportunity to continuously learn and grow.
9. I am involved in the planning of the work that affects me.

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10. I am proud of my professional appearance, language and behaviour.
11. I protect the privacy and security of our guests, my fellow employees and the company's confidential information and assets.
12. I am responsible for uncompromising levels of cleanliness and creating a safe and accident-free environment.

1.3 Setting goals and standards of performance

In order for individuals, departments, or companies to provide high levels of customer service it is important that everyone in the organisation knows how to measure the service being given. These standards of performance can be defined as agreed targets within which we operate which ensure that our customers receive consistent levels of customer service.

Put yourself in the customers' shoes. Depending on the quality of service given, the customer will feel:

- angry
- dissatisfied
- mildly irritated
- indifferent
- quite pleased
- happy
- ecstatic

Which of those do you think will benefit our business the most? Although ecstasy is probably going to be at the top of most people's lists, it is unlikely to be achieved in the long-term. However, if all our customers were happy, or as a minimum, quite pleased with the service provided consistently the impact on the success of the business would be significant.

It is not enough to say things like We want our service to be as good as possible. How will you know how well you are doing when you don't have clear objectives and standards?

Examples of standards of performance could be:

- Everyone takes responsibility for answering the telephone.
- Telephone not allowed to ring more than 4 times before being answered.
- The person answering the call takes responsibility for solving the problem.

Standards of performance to be effective should be:

- achievable
- measurable
- ambitious
- relevant
- time bound
- consistent

Achievable

If you set standards that are impossible to achieve people will become de-motivated and stop trying. To be most effective standards should be agreed by the people responsible for delivering the service, while reflecting the overall needs of the business.

Measurable

Wherever possible standards should be capable of measurement. These measures can be monitored in order to show how well a particular department is performing against its own standards. 'Subjective' standards that are difficult to measure such as 'enthusiasm' and 'friendliness' are important to include in the list, but don't expect to be able to judge yourself or your department against these. Objective standards are easier to measure, such as: 'we will answer all written queries within 2 working days'. These can be measured and managed.

Ambitious

The more ambitious the standards we set ourselves the more we will achieve. If you have high expectations for yourself or low expectations you will tend to not be disappointed by the outcome. Generally, individuals, teams or organisations that set ambitious standards, like MacDonaldis or Marks and Spencer, tend to do best.

Relevant

Standards of performance should relate to the needs of your department and its internal and external customers. So, for example, it would probably not be relevant for members of a department who had no physical contact with the public to set themselves specific standards of dress, unless those standards formed part of the company culture. If standards are not relevant to the needs of the department and its customers it is unlikely they will be carried through.

Time Bound

Standards of performance will change over time. What is relevant today may be totally unsuitable sometime in the future. Technology changes as do peoples' expectations. Standards therefore should be regularly reviewed to ensure they are still what all your customers require.

Consistent

While it is important for members of each department to set high standards of performance, there is also a need for consistent standards to be set centrally that will apply throughout the organisation. These need to be agreed and understood by everyone and followed through, so that customers throughout the UK experience the same high levels of service.

2 Putting customer care into practice

Many organisations try to implement customer care programmes that fail. My bank ran one a few years ago and they had leaflets describing their new commitment to customer service with cartoons that had a customer service theme.

I had plenty of time to read the leaflet one lunchtime in their Leeds branch as I was waiting in a queue of about 10 people with only 2 cashiers on duty.

Putting customer care programmes into practice requires training staff and communicating with customers, but it also requires resources and needs ongoing management, measurement and review to bring long-term beneficial effects.

2.1 Identifying your customers and 'walking the walk'

The first question we need to answer is "Who are our customers?" which seems pretty straight forward at first.

In order to provide a consistently high level of Customer Care we need to identify who our customers are. The most obvious answer is those people who purchase our products and services. However for customers to receive high quality service from any organisation, all departments within the organisation have to work together. For example:

- Sales have to identify and sell to the customer.
- Orders need to be processed.

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- Accounts need to be administered.
- All departments need to talk with each other and build positive relationships.

So, wherever you work, in whatever capacity, you have a range of 'internal' as well as 'external' customers to satisfy. Breakdown of communication or lack of cooperation between departments is the most common source of problems for our external customers. In order to be a truly 'customer driven' organisation we need to pay attention to all our customers both internal and external.

As well as having internal customers you are also a customer with needs that must be satisfied. In the chain of service that exists within the company your internal customers and you must satisfy each other's needs if the external customer is to receive good customer service.

So, for example, let's say work for a firm of printers selling leaflets, marketing materials, letterheads and business cards to companies in your area. A customer rings in saying he has been waiting for a call from your company about an order he placed that hasn't been delivered.

You ask him who he spoke to and he can't tell you who it was because he wasn't given a name, but they did promise to ring him back yesterday and they haven't done it.

Not a major event and probably one that can be sorted out fairly easily. However, with a bit of thought it could have been avoided altogether.

Questions I would be asking if it was my business would be:

1. When a customer rings in with a query what kind of a record is made of the call?
2. When we answer the phone do we give our name? How do we answer the phone?
3. Who should take responsibility for making sure the problem is solved and the customer informed?
4. If an order is delayed why is the customer not informed?
5. What was the reason for the delay?
6. How do sales, who book the orders and production who make the stuff communicate?
7. How often is this happening?
8. How can we stop it happening again?

An important part of developing a customer service culture is experiencing things from the customer's point of view. This can be done by looking at various customer experiences and tracking who gets involved and what systems are currently in place.

So, for example, when a customer places an order what happens? Who gets involved and at what stage of the process? What if something goes wrong? What systems are currently in place and how could they be improved? How can we make our service exceptional rather than just better?

We can also make use of mystery shoppers or feedback from existing customers. Most ideas for customer service improvements come from customers themselves. Keep asking them “How are we doing?” and “How could we do better?”

2.2 Delivering customer care

Customer care begins by making the initial decision to be different and place service at the top of everyone’s agenda. Every part of the business then needs to look at the way it interacts with customers and with other departments and do an audit that identifies “Where we are now.”

Having answered that question the next one we need to ask is “Where do we want to get to?” This is our vision for the future and the more we are able to see our future objectives and describe them, the more likely we are to get there.

The next question is “How are we going to get there?” This is our strategic plan.

Customer care involves everyone in the organisation, but some things have to be in place to make things really happen.

We need a champion at the top of the organisation so there is no doubt that customer care is now central to the way we do business. Their role is to make sure that the goals we have set are reached and to drive the plan through.

On the next level, each department within the business needs a senior manager to oversee their own department’s contribution to achieving the goals and to communicate with other departments.

Depending on the size of the business we also need people within each department with responsibility for implementing change.

This will involve analysing their own systems and ways they interact with customers. It will also involve negotiating with other departments to agree changes and improved service levels. Measurable standards of performance will need to be agreed and put into place.

Once changes have been made they will need to be tested and assessed on a regular basis with feedback being sought from internal and external customers. However, customer service will always change as the needs of our customers change and the external environment changes.

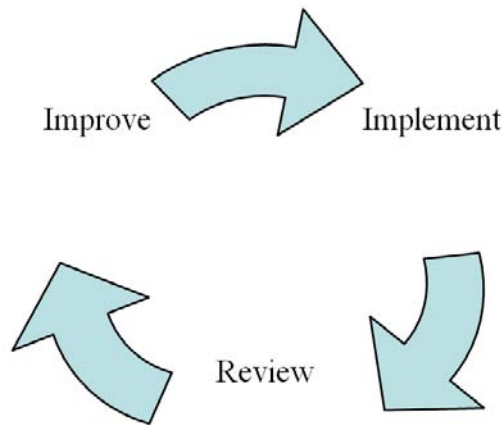
Even though we asked the questions earlier:

“Where we are now.”

“Where do we want to get to?”

“How are we going to get there?”

Once put into place our customer care strategy needs to be reviewed on a regular basis. This then leads to improvements in service levels which are then implemented. This is then repeated on a continuous basis.



2.3 How are we doing? Case study: Starbucks

Starbucks started life in 1971 as a single store in Seattle selling a selection of fresh-roasted whole bean coffees.

From the beginning, Starbucks set out to be a different kind of company. They put great emphasis on the quality of their products, the atmosphere created within their coffee shops and their high commitment to providing excellent customer service.

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Today, with more than 15,000 stores in 50 countries, Starbucks is the premier roaster and retailer of specialty coffee in the world. So how do they keep up their standards and get feedback from their millions of customers worldwide?

The traditional way to get feedback was verbal feedback from customers and staff, written feedback on cards, focus groups and market research. Today, Starbucks is using the Internet and Social Networks to communicate with and get feedback from their customers.

1. Twitter. Starbucks has over 705,000 followers on Twitter answering questions, passing on what people are saying about the brand and creating an open communication channel to speak with the public.
 2. Facebook. Starbucks have over 5,000,000 fans on Facebook. Starbucks uploads content to their Facebook page such as: Videos, blog posts, photos. The company also invites people to events. Fans have a place to open discussions and comment and many of them do.
 3. YouTube. Around 50,000 people subscribe to Starbucks YouTube Channel. They can upload videos of commercials as well as informational videos explaining the origins of the different coffee blends and some of their charity work videos.
 4. My Starbucks Idea. <http://mystarbucksidea.force.com> is a website where customers are asked to share their ideas on anything related to Starbucks. The site gives users the ability to see what others are suggesting, vote on ideas and check out the results. This site is a brilliant and important aspect of Starbucks social media strategy. Users who are part of this network feel that they have some role in the decision making process of the company.
 5. Starbucks Blog entitled “Ideas in Action”. This blog talks about what Starbucks is doing with the ideas given by users on the My Starbucks Idea site. The blog keeps customers in the loop and in the know regarding what’s happening with their ideas and increases their sense of loyalty to the brand.
- This shows how technology can be used to generate communication with large numbers of customers and the feedback used to continuously improve service level and product offerings.

2.4 Developing communication skills

A large part of customer service is how we communicate with our customers. Communication can be face to face, by telephone, by letter, e-mail and to a lesser degree fax.

Direct communication, whether face to face or by phone, involves asking questions, listening and problem solving. We need to be able to deal with unhappy or frustrated customers and send them away feeling positive about their experience. In face to face communication body language is important and contributes, more than anything else, to the message that is received.

Here are some thoughts on communicating with customers.

Dealing with complaining customers

When customers are complaining they are usually in an emotive state of mind. They can appear to be quite aggressive and threatening. Our role is to calm them down and try to solve their problem.

The best way to do this is to let them speak and get out all their frustration. Don't interrupt, but listen and show empathy. You can use what we call NCGs, or non-committal grunts, which demonstrate that you are listening without interrupting.

Look concerned and empathise, but don't apologise until you are sure whether it was your fault, or theirs. This passive way of behaving has the effect that after a while they have got rid of all their frustration and many people actually apologise and this indicates they are ready to talk logically about finding a solution.

Once they have calmed down ask questions to clarify the full facts behind the issue, and then look for a solution.

I usually ask them what they would like me to do. Often their solution is cheaper and easier to deliver than yours. Whatever happens, we negotiate a solution and hopefully get to do business with them again in the future.

Body language

Body language is understood by most people in business today. Inappropriate facial expressions, posture, sharp movements can make a situation much worse.

As a brief summary, if you want to keep your unhappy customer calm, avoid:

- Putting up barriers – folded arms, glaring, hiding behind folders or a desk.
- Aggressive gestures – finger pointing, posturing, hands on hips, feet apart.
- Showing you are bored or irritated – foot tapping, sighing, looking at the clock.

Look serious, but friendly. Stay relaxed, use open gestures; make good but not excessive eye contact. Even when you are talking on the telephone, these gestures can communicate through your voice.

Asking questions

The most effective questions are open questions, closed questions and follow up questions.

Open questions

Open questions are useful because they enable us to do several things:

- Establish rapport
- Open up particular topics
- Discover how customers feel

Open questions are those which cannot be answered with a simple yes or no, but require the customer to give more information. They generally begin with words like 'how' and 'what' or 'tell me' and have the effect of 'opening' the customer up.

Examples of open questions:

What exactly is the problem?

Can you tell me what happened?

How can I help?

These open questions bring out facts, opinions and suggestions from the customer. These are particularly useful in identifying what happened and calming the customer down.

Closed Questions

Closed questions can be equally useful because they enable us to gain specific information. Closed questions bring responses that arm us with facts or specific yes/no opinions.

For example:

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Who did you speak to?

What time did you call?

What is your e-mail address?

Follow-up Questions

Effective listening can involve the use of follow-up questions. The objectives of asking follow-up questions are as follows:

- To show interest and encourage the customer to keep talking.
- To increase the quality and quantity of information already gained.
- To confirm understanding of information already gained.

For example, by responding with really? or ?... and then?, you encourage the customer to continue by actively showing interest in what he, or she, is saying.

Examples of follow-up questions

So we originally said delivery would take a week. Was that acceptable?

You say you weren't happy with the service. What happened?

Effective listening

When we take in information we do so by observing body language and listening to the words people speak and their tone of voice. The words only account for a small percentage of the message we receive. It has been estimated that:

1. 7% of the message comes from the words we hear
2. 38% of the message comes from the tone of voice
3. 55% of the message comes from the body language we observe

Listening can be difficult in face to face situations. There are a number of barriers to effective listening of which we need to be aware.

- Listener has pre-conceived ideas.
- Listener thinks he/she knows more than the speaker.
- Listener is thinking about something else.
- Listener is tired or uncomfortable.
- Listener is afraid of the speaker (or envious, prejudiced, or just not interested).
- Listener is anxious to input his/her own ideas.
- The person speaking has a communication problem, mumbling, using jargon, has a heavy accent.
- There is external noise or interruptions.

The techniques we can use to improve our listening skills in sales are verbal and non-verbal.

Verbal

Verbal techniques that improve our listening skills and help us gain a better understanding of what is being said include:

- Clarifying
- Confirming

Clarifying

In order to increase our understanding of what is being said, we need to make it clear by asking for more details.

You say that we didn't give you a name. Is that correct?

You mentioned some other problems you had last year. Can I ask what they were?

You haven't spoken to the accounts department yet. When would be a convenient time for someone to call?

Confirming

Instead of asking questions to clarify what is being said we can state our understanding and check it with the customer's by asking for confirmation.

The person you spoke to before said delivery would be over the next 2 days. Is that correct?

You are saying at present you would rather cancel the order. Is that the case?

So, you would prefer someone to call in the afternoon. Is 2 o'clock convenient?

Non-verbal

Non-verbal techniques that encourage rapport and give 'signals' to the speaker include:

- Smiling warmly
- Nodding the head
- Making regular eye contact
- Sitting still in a relaxed position
- Changing facial expression in line with what is being said
- Making notes

All of these can be used to good effect, however, for obvious reasons, these should not be taken to extremes.

These techniques demonstrate you are paying attention and value what the customer has to say. All effective listening techniques need to be practised. With practice, you can become a better listener and therefore, a more competent sales person.

Staying Positive

Why is a positive style of communication helpful?

- It helps to keep everyone calm, including you
- Taking control of your actions gives you time to think, observe and stay objective.
- It helps to prevent the situation from becoming worse, which would only give the customer something else to complain about.
- It helps to counteract aggression – it's difficult to shout at someone who is calm and controlled.
- You are continuing to act in a professional manner, on behalf of the company. No matter how you might feel about the situation and the customer, it is important to remember that you are an ambassador for your organisation.

Dealing with customers by phone

Telephones give us instant access to our customers and can be an effective tool in improving our levels of customer service.

The telephone can distort the voice exaggerate the rate of speech and heighten the tone of voice of the caller. In order to compensate for this, you should talk at a slightly slower rate, at a lower pitch and avoid external distractions.

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Many people combine talking on the telephone with other activities such as:-

- using their computer
- texting on their mobile
- eating
- listening to others

In order to be most effective on the telephone, it is best to be free from distractions and able to concentrate your communication skills to the full. The key communication skills we need are: -

- listening
- asking questions
- problem solving

Voice and Manner

In order to create the best impression on the telephone, it is important to remember the following guidelines: -

- Speak at a slightly slower rate than usual
- Smile. Use a warm tone of voice
- Emphasise the points that are important
- Speak clearly
- Be positive. Tell them what you can do
- Be concise
- Avoid jargon or slang
- Be descriptive
- Use gestures
- Be natural

Golden Rules

- Make your voice interesting to listen to, by varying the pitch and volume.
- Punctuate your voice and sentences by introducing effective pauses.
- Be clear and concise in what you say. Avoid bluffing and waffling. If you don't have the information that the customer requires, say so. Then offer to call back when you have found out the answers.
- You will gain far more respect from the customer if you admit that you don't have the information he/she asked for. If this is the case, ring back and ask for more time. If you trust to luck that he/she won't notice the time, the chances are that you will have another complaint to deal with.

When setting a time for you to call back with the answers, set yourself a reasonable deadline. Don't be tempted to say you'll ring back in an hour if you think it's going to be longer than that before you can find out what you need to know.

Listen to the customer rather than think about what you are going to say next. Sound genuinely interested in what they are saying, even if they are not saying what you would like them to.

When taking information down such as names, addresses and telephone numbers, always read the data back to the customer in order to screen out any transcription errors.

Always finish a call with a commitment to some future course of action, and with a note of enthusiasm.

Introduce yourself early in the conversation and clearly. You say your name much faster than anything else, so make a conscious effort to slow yourself down when you say your name.

Ask questions to establish facts and appropriate courses of action.

2.5 Keeping up the momentum

Having gone to all this effort it would be a shame to let things slip. Customer care is a lifelong commitment but it requires work, investment and commitment.

Regular feedback from external and internal customers should ensure that standards are kept up and the level of service continues to improve.

Regular training for staff and incentives can keep customer care at the top of the agenda. You don't have to be a worldwide organisation like Starbucks to commit to customer care. Any business can do it and benefit from it

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