

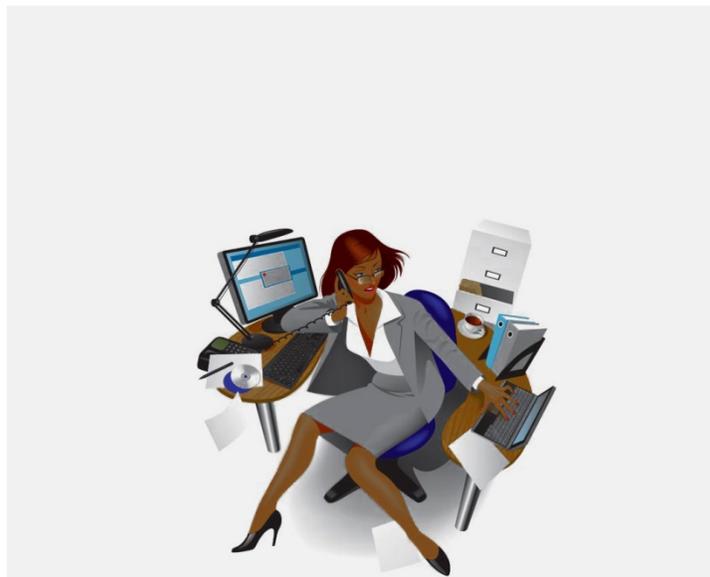


Trenton Public School District

Customer Service Guide

Tips and Guidelines for all Trenton Public Schools' Employees

July 1, 2016



Special Thanks To The Anchorage School District.

"Children Come First, Los Niños son Primero."

Contents

Introduction	3
Creating a culture of customer service	4
Customer service attributes	5
Customer service challenges	5
Tips for outstanding customer service	6
Conversation and telephone tips	8
Particularly difficult situations	12
Dress to impress	14
Do you have them at “hello?”	15

Introduction

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 help to make your job less stressful and you'll gain additional free time that might otherwise have been spent dealing with a dissatisfied customer.

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 the Trenton School District, whether or not you interact with the public. Excellent customer service is a district and board goal. All employees are also evaluated based on their customer service skills.

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 welcoming environment begins with the treatment people receive at the door. 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 in trying to solve their issue will go a long way toward how they perceive customer service at your workplace.

The ABCs of excellent customer service include:

- A.** Appearance – yours and your workplace,
- B.** Behavior – How you handle conflict, and
- 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 e-mail should not be used to solve emotional, contentious or highly confrontational issues.

Our brains are wired to quickly scan our surroundings to figure out whether it is safe or dangerous. That means your reputation and the reputation of your school or department and Trenton School District hinges on the first few seconds of your interaction.

Customer Service Attributes

1. An acceptance of cultural diversity.
2. A passion for taking care of coworkers, students, parents and the community.
3. A willingness to be flexible.
4. An eagerness to learn.
5. Excellent communication skills.

Main office administrative personnel are often the first to encounter disgruntled customers. The best customer service representatives see complaints as opportunities, since resolving them enhances the school's and district's credibility.

Soliciting feedback and following up to ensure that service has been delivered to the customer's satisfaction fosters customer trust.

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 in departments and areas throughout the District in order to meet the customer's needs.
5. Balancing customer needs and district policies, especially when they conflict.
6. Continually learning about new policies, services and internal procedures despite time constraints and a lack of available training or coaching.

Tips for Outstanding Customer Service

- **Fairness**

When welcoming and professionally dressed staff greet all visitors promptly and quickly ask to offer assistance, customers get the idea that they will be treated justly and impartially.

- **Control**

Customers feel a sense of satisfaction when they have some control over the interaction. This includes a way to elevate their concern if they cannot be managed at the initial contact. If your workplace doesn't have a clearly articulated customer-service strategy developed by a broad group of employees, parents and community members, suggest it to your leadership. Take initiative to volunteer your services to make it happen and call upon the Office of School Support at (609) 656-4900 Ext. 5794 for help.

- **Information and communication**

Visitors need and want information about your policies and procedures. 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:

Tips for Outstanding Customer Services (continued)

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?
- Plainly marked entrances, particularly the main door?
- 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 and professionally answer telephones?
- A well-informed staff with basic, up-to-date information readily accessible?

Conversation and Telephone Tips

Be prepared:

- Use active listening, a structured form of listening and responding that focuses on the speaker. Active listening creates mutual understanding. The listener focuses on what the speaker is saying instead of thinking of a response to what is being said.
- The listener then repeats in the listener's own words, what he or she thinks the speaker has said.
- The listener doesn't have to agree with the speaker – he/she simply repeats what he/she heard the speaker say. This allows the speaker to know that they've been heard and understood, or, allows them to try and explain better what they mean.
- Know how to use the phone and its features.
- Make eye contact if in person. Be aware of what your body language is saying.
- Have a pen and paper handy.

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.
- Assume a "telephone" voice. Be aware of how fast or loud you are speaking.

Conversation and Telephone Tips (continued)

- 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.
- 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:* “(school name) 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.”
- If the caller thanks you, the appropriate response is “You're welcome.”
- If the caller says he/she needs to talk with someone immediately, ask the caller the nature of the emergency. If it is a legitimate emergency, place the caller on hold, arrange for someone to supervise the students, if necessary, and ask the person to come to the telephone.

Conversation and Telephone Tips (continued)

When the requested person is unavailable:

- If the person is in a conference, observing in a classroom or out of the building in 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 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: “This 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.

Conversation and Telephone Tips (continued)

“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.

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 punching 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.

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 be hesitant to call your School Resource Officers or Trenton School District’s Security and Emergency Preparedness office. Have emergency contacts readily accessible.
- 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.

Particularly Difficult Situations (continued)

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.
- Be pro-active. Bring rumors and issues in to the open. Seek out group confirmation or denial of accusations.

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 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, are you a shooting star or shooting yourself in the foot?

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.

Standard	What I think (from 1-10)	Someone else's score
Eye contact/pleasant tone of voice		
Ability to conceal frustration		
Willingness to offer apology when it isn't my fault		
Willingness to offer apology when it is my fault		
Ability to handle unreasonable complaints		
Accessibility		
Willingness to make accommodations		
Indirect communication (Body Language)		
Response to criticism		
Attitude		
Total score (out of 100 points)		

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 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.