

# Customer Driven Service



## Learner's Guide

National RTAP is a Federal Transit Administration program administered by the Neponset Valley Transportation Management Association  
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888-589-6821

Your Keys to Providing  
Exceptional Customer  
Experiences in Transit

Produced by the  
NATIONAL RURAL TRANSIT  
ASSISTANCE PROGRAM  
(RTAP)

National  
**RTAP**  
Rural Transit Assistance Program





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### Project Management

Jim Chesnutt	<a href="mailto:jim.chesnutt@nusura.com">jim.chesnutt@nusura.com</a>	(303) 513-2389
Mark Amann	<a href="mailto:mark.amann@nusura.com">mark.amann@nusura.com</a>	(303) 789-9289

### Subject Matter Expertise

Michael Noel of Lazaro & Noel LLC	<a href="mailto:direction@lazaro-noel.com">direction@lazaro-noel.com</a>	(814) 262-7535
Gary Gleason	<a href="mailto:gary.gleason@nusura.com">gary.gleason@nusura.com</a>	(970) 544-5358
June Isaacson Kailes	<a href="mailto:jik@pacbell.net">jik@pacbell.net</a>	(310) 821-7080
Francisco Oaxaca	<a href="mailto:francisco.oaxaca@nusura.com">francisco.oaxaca@nusura.com</a>	(909) 215-5024

### Interactive and Multimedia Production

Mark Amann  
Jim Chesnutt  
Bryan Dahlberg  
Andrew Hegel  
Seth Mascarenas

### Research and Technical Writing

Jeremy Van Dusseldorp  
Elizabeth Winter

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# Introduction

## WHAT IS CUSTOMER SERVICE?

*“Customer service is awareness of needs, problems, fears and aspirations.”*

— AUTHOR UNKNOWN

*“It starts with respect. If you respect the customer as a human being, and truly honor their right to be treated fairly and honestly, everything else is much easier.”*

— DOUG SMITH

*“One of the deep secrets of life is that all that is really worth doing is what we do for others.”*

— LEWIS CARROLL

*“Your most unhappy customers are your greatest source of learning.”*

— BILL GATES

### Providing excellent customer service

in the transit environment is in many ways no different than providing excellent customer service in any environment. All customers want to feel welcomed, valued and appreciated, and this holds true for the people who ride aboard your vehicles, call to schedule rides, or ask for route or schedule information.

In the past, customer service was seen as the responsibility of those individuals who had face-to-face interactions with customers, namely you, the transit operator or transit staff member who interacts with the customer. Today, it is understood that customer service is the responsibility of everyone in your organization all the way up to the board of directors. Your organization exists to serve the customer. However, as the members of your organization who interact with customers the most, you have an added responsibility to present a polished image. After all, customers will judge the entire organization by the interactions they have with you!

Fortunately, providing excellent customer service relies on doing simple things. It requires showing up to work well rested, cool, calm, in control and ready to perform your duties; it requires treating the customers in a respectful and polite manner; and it requires remembering that you are the face of your entire organization and taking the extra steps

to ensure that your image is a good one. Though there are countless tips and strategies you can learn to improve the way you provide customer service, remember that providing excellent customer service comes down to treating the customer as you would want to be treated. Keeping these things in mind will ensure your customers leave satisfied, and will make your job easier and more enjoyable at the same time. ■





# I. The Keys to Customer Service

## THE BIG PICTURE

Whether we may think so or not, we are all experts at customer service. Each and every day, since you were a young child, you have been a customer. Whether you are shopping for groceries, buying gas at the gas station or going to the movies, you have many customer experiences daily.

We all intuitively know what constitutes a great customer experience. Think of a time you had a great meal at a restaurant served by terrific waitstaff or were helped by a friendly and attentive employee at a department store. In these moments, you were receiving superior customer service. Providing excellent customer service is about creating a positive experience for customers and an environment where they feel valued and taken care of. All customers, regardless of the service or product they are purchasing, want to feel:

- Welcomed
- Appreciated and valued
- Paid attention to
- Respected
- Safe
- Listened to and heard
- Taken care of



### Fast Fact:

*The Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) defines customer service as “...doing whatever it takes to satisfy your passengers. Customer satisfaction, or lack thereof, is the difference between the services customers expect from your transit system and the services they perceive they are getting.”*

*(Report 54)*

## Who Is Responsible for Customer Service?

As a transit operator or transit staff member who interacts with customers, you have the most face-to-face interaction with your company’s clientele. This means that you are primarily responsible for creating an excellent experience for your organization’s customers. However, the responsibility does not fall solely on you. All of the other members of your organization, from the mechanics who service your vehicle to the dispatcher who designs your route and schedule, also contribute to the customer experience. If your vehicle breaks down due to lack of maintenance or if you have an unmanageable schedule that makes riders late, it is certain that they will not feel they received great customer service, even if you as a transit employee have been friendly, polite and helpful. Even managers and the CEO of your company are responsible for customer service because as a public service, transit exists not simply to move people from one point to another but to serve customers and improve the ease and quality of their lives. Members of your organization who are responsible for customer service include:

- People who clean the vehicles
- Mechanics who service the vehicles
- Dispatchers
- Schedulers
- Customer service representatives
- Paratransit or demand response reservationists
- Managers and supervisors
- Board of directors
- Bus and van operators

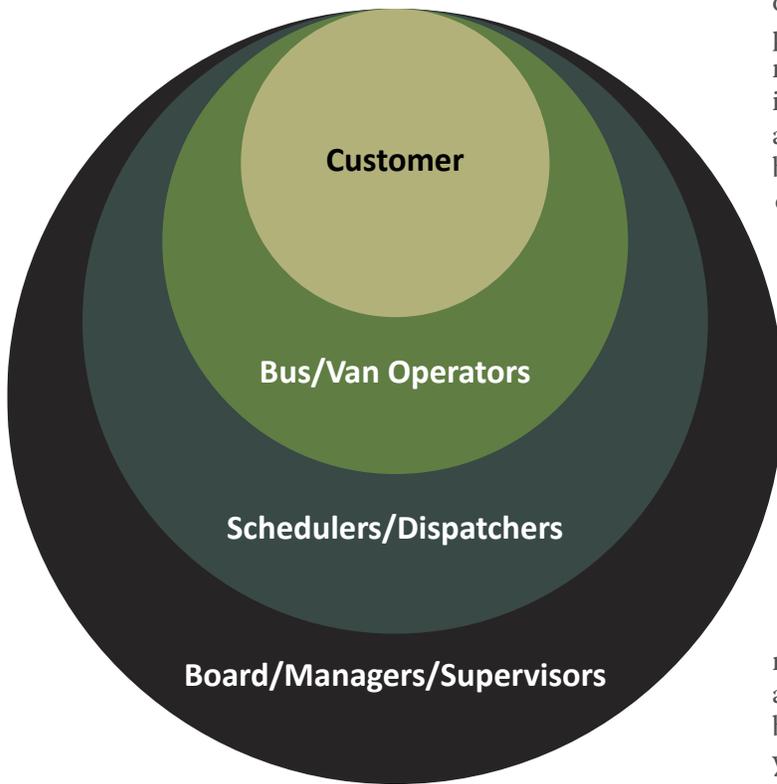
## The Relationship Between Transit Operators and Dispatchers

Transit operators and dispatchers all interact closely with customers and it is vital that they treat not only the customers well, but also each other. Dispatchers hold a special role in a transit organization as they may interact both with customers on the phone and bus and van operators in person. If the dispatcher treats a customer rudely on the phone, the customer may then go on and take it out on the person driving the bus or van the next day. Conversely, if the dispatcher treats the

van or bus operator rudely when he/she comes to pick up his/her assignment in the morning, the transit operator may end up treating customers more rudely. In many ways, dispatchers are at the centerpiece of customer service. They interact with both the customers and the drivers. Therefore, transit operators and dispatchers need to support and help one another. Their relationship has a direct impact on the customer.

## Changing the Hierarchy of the Transit Organization

When you think of the hierarchy of your typical transit organization, you may picture a pyramid with board members and the CEO at the top and transit operators at the bottom. It is likely that nowhere in the hierarchy does the word “customer” even appear. Because the primary aim of any organization is to serve the customer, and because all employees, even those without direct contact with the customer, are responsible for ensuring an excellent customer experience, a new hierarchy must be adopted that is “customer-centric”—in



other words, centered around the customer.

Think of the hierarchy of your organization as a bullseye with the customers being the main target, in the center of the bullseye. The focus of your organization then becomes the customers. Transit operators make up the next ringed layer of the bullseye as they have the most direct contact

## Did You Know?

*The Americans with Disabilities Act is a civil rights law that guarantees people with disabilities an equal opportunity to take part in our society. Transportation services are key to that participation. The ADA requires transit systems to ensure that their personnel are trained to operate vehicles and equipment safely and to treat individuals with disabilities in a respectful and courteous manner.*

with the customers and are primarily responsible for the customer experience. The dispatchers and schedulers comprise the next ring as they design transit routes and take calls from customers, among other things. These are tasks that have a direct impact on a customer’s experience. Furthermore, it is also part of the dispatchers’, schedulers’ and supervisors’ responsibilities to support transit operators who, in turn, serve customers. Lastly, even managers and board members are included in the hierarchy because it is their job to promote a customer-centric culture and support transit operators, dispatchers and schedulers, all of whom serve the customer.

Though sometimes we see our organization as made up of separate departments all working independently from one another, the reality is that all employees and departments exist to serve the customer and improve his/her experience. In short, all activities or job duties within an entire transit organization exist solely to support the center of the organization: the customers and the bus and van operators who serve them.

## Who Is the Customer?

The obvious transit customers are the people who ride aboard your vehicles. However, because transit is a public service that brings together individuals and businesses and is overseen by the local government, your customers also include people in the broader community. For example, if you drop-off a rider at a hospital or a senior center, the organizations that operate those facilities also become your customer as you bring their clients to them and contribute to the success of their businesses. Furthermore, if a bus or van is consistently running behind schedule, making individuals late for their appointments or having them show up to a location flustered and upset, you

are negatively affecting those organizations and making it more difficult for them to run a successful business.

As a public service, transit relies on the government, in part, for financial assistance, and therefore, the state and county representatives in your area are also your customers. Similarly, the community in which your transit system is located is a customer because citizens are able to vote on issues pertaining to public transit. Finally, even non-passengers qualify as customers because their tax dollars fund transit.

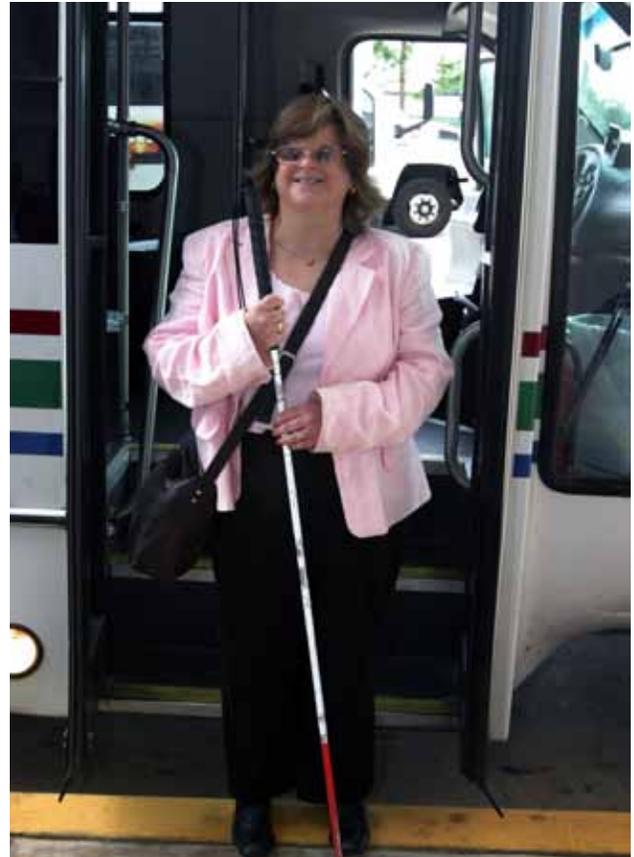


Some  
customers you may not  
think of include:

- *Doctors' offices*
- *Hospitals*
- *Libraries*
- *Senior centers*
- *Local businesses*
- *Stores and/or the mall*
- *Government agencies*
- *The community*
- *Non-passengers*
- *Schools and colleges*
- *Shopping centers*

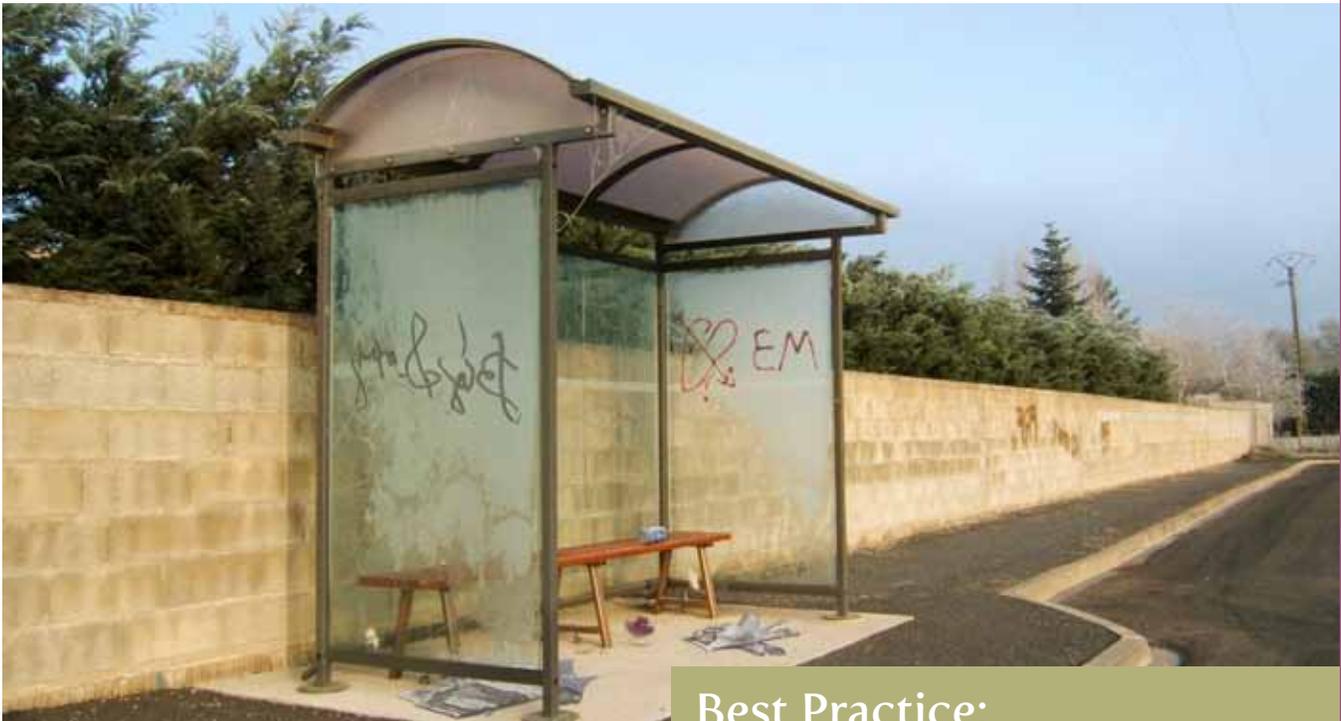
## The Customer Experience

Many factors shape the customer experience. Customers begin to form their opinion of your organization before they ever step foot on your bus or van. All the interactions that customers have with your organization, whether it be calling dispatch with a question about a schedule or waiting for a bus in a shelter, are moments where customers form opinions of your company. But none of these is likely to be as powerful and enduring as you and your actions.



### **Moments of Truth**

Many companies use the concept “moments of truth” to identify any time or place where a customer may make a judgment about your business or service. If you walk into a grocery store and are dissatisfied because you have a question and can’t find anyone to answer it, that in itself is a moment of truth, but in reality your opinion of the grocery store may have been formed before you even walked through the door. Perhaps you drove through a parking lot that had garbage strewn around. Your opinion of the store was formed before you even set foot inside it, and not being able to find an employee to answer your question simply reinforced it. In short, each point where you formed a judgment is a moment of truth.



In transit service, this happens all the time. If a customer sees a dirty bus stop, waits in a bus shelter where the windows haven't been cleaned in months or witnesses a transit operator being rude, these are all moments of truth that lead to a judgment. The positive side of this is that each interaction a customer has with your organization is also an opportunity to leave a customer feeling cared for, leading the customer to form a favorable opinion of your organization. When considering how to provide exceptional customer service, it is important that an organization consider not only the experience passengers have aboard a vehicle but also every way a customer may come into contact with the organization. Some examples of moments of truth include:

- The cleanliness of bus shelters
- The condition of buses driving around town
- The amount of time a customer is kept on hold when they call dispatch, the paratransit reservations line or customer service
- How easy it is to access the bus schedule and other service information
- The condition of the transit facility where buses and vans are parked

### ***The Power of Generalization***

Though you may consider yourself a single employee playing a very small role in your organization, in fact, you have the power to influence a customer's vision of the entire organization. The

## **Best Practice: Focus on Making Your Customers' Lives Better**

***From the first moment of orientation at Nordstrom department store, trainees are taught that their foremost responsibility is to do whatever they can to make life easier for their customers. For this to happen, employees must understand the needs of their customers.***

*(Spector, 2005)*

Power of Generalization refers to the idea that a single good or bad experience becomes a customer's view of the entire organization.

Let's say you walk into a bank to cash a check. That bank is one branch of a 27-branch bank that has over \$1 billion in assets and employs 1,000 people—in other words, a very large company. If you walk up to the counter and the teller doesn't acknowledge you and seems distracted while waiting on you, your view of the entire organization becomes, "Boy, this bank is lousy!" based on your interaction with 1 out of 1,000 employees. In truth, the other 999 employees could be courteous, helpful and very friendly. Fortunately, the opposite is also true. If you have a great experience with one teller at that same bank, you will go on to tell people you know

about how great that bank is even though you have no experience with the other 999 employees who may be rude and unhelpful. Your view of an entire organization often comes from one experience with a single person.

As a transit operator or transit staff member who interacts with customers, you are also responsible, in part, for the image of your entire organization. If your company has a bus driver who is rude, even to just one person, other passengers on the bus see that and believe that all transit operators who work for that organization are also rude—including you! The image of your whole organization becomes a negative one to all of the passengers who witness that incident and also to all the people they tell about it. The least friendly, most unhelpful employee in your company becomes the measuring stick for how everyone else is seen.

### **Judgments and First Impressions**

People make judgments. It is simply part of human nature. If a driver is messy or looks as if he just rolled out of bed, passengers equate that with an organization that is careless, disorganized and unconcerned with its customers. Conversely, if a driver is neat, clean, awake, welcoming and smiling, customers believe that the organization is safe, reputable and reliable. Based on their first impression of drivers, the interior of the bus or the bus shelter, customers make an assessment of the professionalism of the organization as a whole. Furthermore, passengers generalize the judgments they make based on their first impressions and this becomes their view of the entire organization.

People make judgments about things within their first two minutes of experiencing them and these first impressions are very real and lasting. Transit

## **Best Practice: Create an Experience for the Customer**

*Starbucks strives to sell an experience.*

*That experience is created and sustained by the employees on the frontlines.*

*Baristas and cashiers are trained to ask for and memorize the names and drinks of their regulars because the company knows that customers who are greeted by name and with their drink come back.*

*Dave Pace, the company's vice president, said, "When a customer comes in and the person behind the counter says hello and maybe greets you by name, you feel a connection you don't find with retailers anymore. It makes you feel welcome, and it makes you want to come back."*

*(Weber, 2005)*

staff needs to realize that whenever the bus or office doors open up, what the customer sees becomes his impression of the entire organization. Coming to work neat, clean and awake are essential to ensuring that the first impressions customers make will be positive ones. ■



# Chapter I Exercises and Quiz

## **EXERCISE 1: MOMENTS OF TRUTH**

Review the examples of moments of truth in this chapter. List as many additional examples as you can. Be prepared to discuss what could be done in each instance to make the moment of truth a positive one.

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## **EXERCISE 2: BEST PRACTICE: FOCUS ON MAKING YOUR CUSTOMERS' LIVES BETTER.**

Consider the best practice from Nordstrom department store: Trainees are taught that their foremost responsibility is to do whatever they can to make life easier for their customers. For this to happen, employees must understand the needs of their customers.

List ways that you could make your customers' lives better. Be prepared to discuss your answers. Also be prepared to discuss any barriers you see to implementing the items on your list.

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## CHAPTER 1 QUICK QUIZ: THE BIG PICTURE

1. True or False: Everyone within the transit organization is responsible for customer service.
  - A. True
  - B. False
2. True or False: The Americans with Disabilities Act requires transit systems to ensure that their personnel are trained to operate vehicles and equipment safely and to treat individuals with disabilities in a respectful and courteous manner.
  - A. True
  - B. False
3. According to the new customer-centric hierarchy for transit, which groups of people have a role in supporting the transit operators in their efforts to provide excellent customer service?
  - A. Board of directors
  - B. Managers/supervisors
  - C. Schedulers
  - D. Dispatchers
  - E. All of the above
4. True or False: A customer begins forming an opinion of his/her experience as soon as he/she sits down on the bus.
  - A. True
  - B. False
5. Which of the following is an example of good customer service:
  - A. Smiling
  - B. Welcoming customers
  - C. Keeping transit facilities and buses clean
  - D. Remembering and using a regular customer's name
  - E. All of the above



## II. Customer Service in Action

### CREATING A CULTURE OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

Creating an excellent experience for the customer who rides on a transit vehicle takes more than just a welcoming and helpful transit driver. It takes:

- Mechanics who care about servicing vehicles
- People who care about cleaning the vehicle
- Schedulers who care about developing runs that work for operators and customers
- Call-takers who care about providing information
- Administrators who care about the well-being of their employees
- Drivers who come to work with a positive attitude

### Your Performance Code

As employees, we often think that our job description is an explanation of what is expected of us. In reality, what is expected of you can be broken down into just eight simple things:

- To report to work on time, cool, calm and in control
- To present a neat and clean appearance
- To practice safety in all work activities
- To demonstrate professionalism in all job-related skills
- To respect the property of the company
- To treat co-workers with dignity and respect
- To treat customers with dignity and respect
- To present a positive image of the company when performing job duties

While you may see some of these requirements in job descriptions, many of them are often missing. By abiding by this code you will ensure that all customers receive a positive experience and that you are performing your job with a high level of professionalism. These qualities are not just expected of bus or van operators but of all employees, including managers, mechanics and dispatchers, to name a few. If everyone in your company commits to each one of these things, your company will surely be successful.

### General Guidelines for Serving Customers with Disabilities

- *Treat customers with disabilities with courtesy and respect.*
- *Use person-first language (“person who uses a wheelchair” instead of “wheelchair user”).*
- *Give customers with disabilities the same information and choices that you give other customers.*
- *Never make assumptions about your customers’ physical or mental abilities.*
- *Ask customers if they need assistance — don’t assume.*
- *Do not touch customers without their permission.*
- *Speak directly to customers, not their companions.*
- *Speak clearly with a normal tone and speed unless the customer requests otherwise.*
- *If you are asked to repeat or write what you said, do so calmly and pleasantly.*
- *Be patient and allow the customer to take his time. Respond to him in a calm, professional manner.*

*(From Easter Seals Project ACTION Transit Operator’s Pocket Guide)*

### The Way We Treat Passengers

It is important to realize that what you and your coworkers say or believe about customers will affect how you treat them. It is common for transit operators to label the people who use their services; perhaps you think the only people who ride the bus are older adults, individuals with lower incomes or persons with disabilities.

If you consider these people dependent on your services, and if you believe you are the only company providing such services, either consciously or sub-

## Best Practice: Empathize with the Customer

*Insurance companies often receive poor customer service reviews and are viewed by some as caring more about profits than people. However, 81% of USAA Insurance customers polled believe that the company cares more about them than the bottom line.*

*Most of USAA's clientele is made up of military personnel and their families. To ensure that USAA representatives understand their customers' needs, all employees undergo a ten-week orientation that simulates the difficulties faced by military personnel. Trainees are given ready-to-eat military standard meals, heavy gear that they must wear and are ordered around with stern commands. This "boot camp" is meant to instill a sense of unity and empathy before an employee responds to his or her first customer. This way, USAA clients are always treated as people and never merely as another policyholder.*

*(Fleurke, 2009)*

consciously, you create an attitude of "Aren't they lucky that we're here?" You may believe that your passengers need you more than you need them. This belief can affect the way we treat customers. For example, if the bus is late, perhaps your attitude is, "Well, at least it showed up." Again, remember that the entire purpose of your organization is to serve the customer.

Much as passengers can characterize all transit employees based on one bad experience with one driver, transit employees can come to characterize all passengers based on their experience with a few difficult ones. For example, if you have a customer who is rude or particularly slow, you may come to

believe that all customers are rude or slow. This can affect the way that you treat customers in general, even customers with whom you have never interacted before.

Often times, bus and van operators may believe that customer service is different in transit as they are not selling a product such as televisions or cars, but rather selling a service—a service that people need. However, for the person receiving the service, it is not very different. Even though as transit employees you are providing a necessary public service, it is important to leave customers happy, satisfied and wanting to use the service again.

Finally, remember that if it weren't for the customer, you would not have a job. If you provide a bus service and people stop riding your buses, no one is going to have a job for very long. We exist because the customer exists and not the other way around.

### The Importance of Internal Morale

While we all understand the importance of treating customers with a pleasant, welcoming and respectful attitude, sometimes we forget that it is equally important to treat our fellow workers the same way. How we treat each other at work—including how we welcome each other, address each other and care for each other—directly influences how we interact with customers. If you work in an environment where people do not greet each other in the morning, speak to one another in a rude or sarcastic tone or speak badly about one another, you are likely to become used to this way of communicating and carry it into your interactions with customers. In short, if you work in a workplace with poor morale, it is very difficult to provide excellent customer service. If you work in an organization where people greet one another with a smile and are generally friendly and polite, it is likely you will treat your customers with a similar attitude.

Some things you can do to ensure good morale in your workplace include:

- Saying "Good Morning"
- Speaking to co-workers politely
- Asking co-workers how their day is going
- Thanking co-workers at the end of the day

### Who's Responsible for Morale?

Each and every member of your company is responsible for good internal morale—including you! However, even when we know that we are the people responsible for good morale, we often blame others for poor morale. It is common to hear, "If my manager just understood..." or, "If I was only better

paid...” or, “If the mechanics would just get these buses fixed...” placing the blame on others. Every time you do this you contribute to the poor morale of your organization. Changing the environment in which you work begins with you changing your attitude.

## Characteristics of the Customer Service Superstar

Though we all know what excellent customer service consists of, some individuals are naturally better at providing it than others. People who excel at customer service:

- Have a positive attitude
- Enjoy working with people
- Put the customer on “center stage”
- Have a high energy level
- View their job as a human relations profession
- Can allow customers to believe they are right (even when they are wrong)
- Anticipate customer service opportunities

While it is possible for everyone to be great at customer service, some individuals need more coaching. People for whom customer service does not come naturally may:

- Seem depressed or angry
- Prefer to work alone
- Need to be the center of attention
- Work at their own relaxed pace
- Put technical aspects of the job before customer satisfaction
- Need things to happen in an orderly or predictable way
- Need others to know that they are right

## Delight Customers with a Positive Attitude

*Having a positive attitude is the foundation of excellent customer service. It provides the necessary perspective that allows you to listen to, care about and solve your customers' concerns. Cultivate the ability to enjoy doing something special for others and obtain nothing but a thank you or a smiling face in return.*

Providing excellent customer service is a choice. Even if you are one of the individuals for whom customer service does not come easily, you can choose each and every moment to have a positive attitude or to allow the customer to be right. While at first it may be challenging, over time, putting the customer on center stage will come naturally and you will see how it actually makes your job easier.

## The Steps in Quality Customer Service

Five basic and simple steps can sum up everything involved in providing quality customer service:

1. Have a positive attitude
2. Welcome customers
3. Identify customer needs
4. Provide for customer's needs
5. Thank customers for using your service

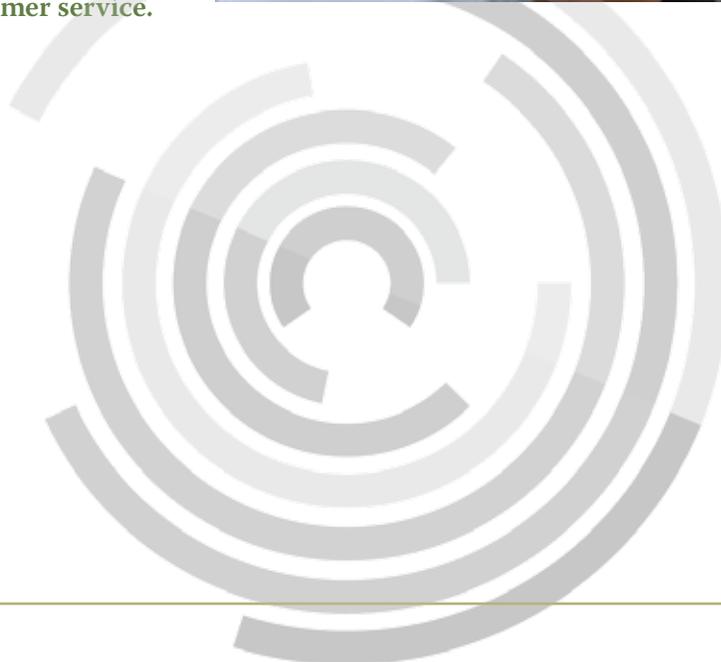
Simply by mastering these five actions, you will be providing exceptional customer service and, in turn, make fulfilling your responsibilities significantly easier. ■





## CHAPTER 2 QUICK QUIZ: CUSTOMER SERVICE IN ACTION: CREATING A CULTURE OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

1. Which of the following is part of your performance code:
  - A. To report to work on time, cool, calm and in control
  - B. To present a neat and clean appearance
  - C. To treat co-workers with dignity and respect
  - D. To present a positive image of the company when performing job duties
  - E. All of the above
2. True or False: Customer service superstars tend to think of providing transportation as a human relations profession.
  - A. True
  - B. False
3. True or False: Customers need us more than we need them.
  - A. True
  - B. False
4. Which of the following is not a recommended thing to do to ensure positive morale in your workplace:
  - A. Saying "Good Morning"
  - B. Speaking rudely to co-workers
  - C. Asking co-workers how their days are going
  - D. Thanking co-workers at the end of the day
5. True or False: Having a positive attitude is the foundation of excellent customer service.
  - A. True
  - B. False



## III. Taking Care of Your Customers

Customers expect their requests to be responded to quickly, professionally and with care, leaving them feeling valued and understood. As the people in your organization with the most face-to-face contact with customers, this becomes a large part of your job. It is important to remember, however, that treating customers with a friendly and respectful attitude will ultimately make your job easier.

### What Does It Take to Satisfy the Customer?

In the broadest definition, customer service involves doing whatever it takes to satisfy the customer. In a transit environment it is not just about moving individuals from one location to another, it is about improving the quality of their lives. Individuals and organizations that care about customer service always see through the eyes of the customer and ask, "What does it take to satisfy this person?" Part of the challenge is that what it takes to satisfy the customer varies from person to person.

For a commuter who is using a bus to get to work, his or her primary concern is likely, "Will I get there on time?" For a senior citizen going to a senior citizen's center on the bus, time may not be his or her number one priority, however having a friendly and helpful driver may be. Different passengers have different needs and transit operators must make it their goal to satisfy them all.

### **The Seven Basic Needs of Transit Customers**

*(Adapted from the Transit Cooperative Research Program)*

The needs of all transit customers, whether they be older adults, college students or professionals, can be boiled down to seven basic things:

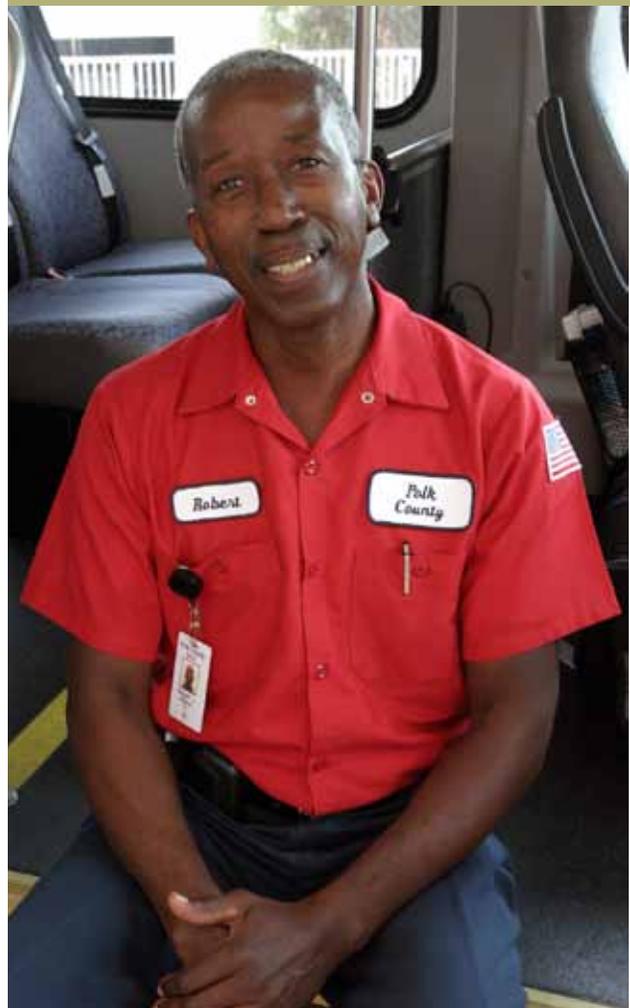
#### **1. Reliability:**

Reliable transit service means that your customers have confidence that vehicles will arrive at their stops and final destinations on time. For transit providers, delivering reliable and predictable service is crucial for attracting and keeping customers.

Reliability does not simply mean that transit operators get their vehicles to their destinations on time, but also that vehicles are well-maintained to avoid mechanical problems on the road, that schedules are well-designed and realistic, and that there

### Best Practice: Take the Extra Step

*The drivers for Boulder Special Transit in Boulder, Colorado, walk their customers out of their homes and into their destinations. If the client is going to an appointment, drivers routinely walk the client into the building and find the correct office before leaving.*



is a sufficient number of highly trained van and bus operators on staff who know what to do in the case that something does go wrong. In short, it is the responsibility of the entire transit organization, not simply bus and van drivers.



## 2. Safety and Security:

Transit passengers must not only be safe but also feel safe for the entirety of the time they are using your organization's services, whether they be waiting at a bus stop or a transfer station, or riding on the bus itself. As employees, it is also your right to feel safe and secure as well. While you may initially think that providing safety in the transit environment means minimizing the risk of accidents, it also includes making sure that facilities such as pick-up and drop-off locations are well lit and that vehicles are not overcrowded.



## 3. Convenience and Accessibility:

Convenience in the transit environment means fulfilling your customers' needs by providing transit that is easy for customers to access and takes passengers where they want to go, when they want to go there. This means that routes should serve not only where passengers live, but also where they need to go and be available during the hours and on the days when customers need to travel. Convenience also means that transfers should be timed so that passengers can go directly from an incoming to an outgoing vehicle without excessive waiting. Finally, other aspects of convenience include such things as having schedules accessible, perhaps by putting them on the Internet or by having them available at many locations around town. Schedules and other information must also be provided in formats that are usable by persons with access and functional needs.



## 4. Clean and Comfortable:

Both customers and employees want to spend time in an environment that is clean and comfortable. This is not limited exclusively to vehicles but also includes bus stops, transfer stations and other pick-up and drop-off points. Additionally, drivers themselves should look neat and well groomed when they report for work. Remember, passengers rely on first impressions, and for the people aboard your vehicle, you represent the entire company.

## 5. Understandable:

It is essential that both existing and current customers understand how to use a transit system including how to access the services and



## Best Practice: Keep it Simple and Client Centered

*The employee handbook for Nordstrom department store is a simple card with a welcome greeting on the front side and the company's mission statement on the back.*

*It reads:*

*"We're glad to have you with our company. Our number one goal is to provide outstanding customer service. Set both your personal and professional goals high. We have great confidence in your ability to achieve them. We have only one rule: use good judgment in all situations."*

how to pay. For example, route schedules and general information about your services need to be easily accessible to customers or potential customers. As an employee, you must also be able to communicate effectively with passengers about system policies and procedures and to answer any questions that customers may have.

## 6. Affordable:

Public transportation should be an affordable option and fare rates should take into account different passengers' abilities to pay. Senior citizen or student rates are common and many systems also sell fares in reduced rate coupon books or monthly passes to reduce costs to the rider.



## 7. Friendly and/or Empathetic:

All customers want to feel valued and cared for, and this includes when riding on public transit. It is essential that transit staff develops good listening and communication skills and that they are sensitive to all customers.



Remember, not all customers have the same needs and different needs hold different levels of importance for passengers. While a college student may want a transit service to be very convenient, dropping them off at campus just before his or her classes begin, for an older adult, friendliness of the transit operator may rank number one. It is important to remember that while each rider may not have all seven needs, all of these needs must still be met to ensure a successful service that people will want to continue to use.

## **Generational Customer Service**

In the transit environment, your customers will span a wide range of ages from infants to older adults. Though some needs remain consistent for all transit passengers, some are unique to people of different age groups. It is important to remember that the world has changed a great deal and that technology has advanced rapidly in the lifetimes of older customers. Conversely, younger passengers are accustomed to technology and have grown up with instant access to information for most of their lives. As a result of these generational differences, young and older passengers have different expectations. Older adults typically:

- Expect eye contact
- Appreciate and expect to be treated with courtesy and respect
- Prefer personal contact or telephone customer relations
- Do not like less personal mediums such as text messages or the Internet

Conversely, younger passengers:

- Prefer less formal interactions
- Expect less eye contact
- Value technology
- Are used to multitasking and expect instant information
- Prefer online communication, information and social media

Although there is a good deal of evidence to back up these trends, it is important to remember that they are also, to a certain degree, generalizations, and there are always exceptions to the rule. However, do remember that younger passengers and older passengers expect different things when it comes to customer service.

## **Opportunities to Excel**

At some point in our lives we've all had the experience of going into a department store, hardware store or grocery store and asking for help. We often ask the first employee we see regardless of what department they work in. Perhaps, for

example, you go into a hardware store hoping to buy a ladder. The first employee you see may be in the lighting section, but it is likely that you will ask him or her where the ladders are and expect that he/she will give you directions or walk there with you. As a customer, you would not be pleased with an answer like "Hey, I work in lighting! Why are you asking me?"

A similar situation often occurs in transit. A customer may ask an operator, "Where can I catch the bus to the mall?" and receive the response, "I don't know. Call the office." The operator may drive a different route and, in reality, may know very little about the bus that goes to the mall. However, just as you wouldn't want to receive this response if you were a customer, the transit customer who hears this is left dissatisfied as well.

Whenever a customer asks a question of anyone in a transit organization, he/she is either expecting the answer or someone to find the answer for him/her, not a response of "I don't know," or, "Why are you asking me?" Often customers will ask you questions about an aspect of the organization you are not familiar with. This is because the customer sees you as representing the entire organization. Even though you don't have the knowledge of the entire organization, it is still your responsibility to provide them with the information he/she needs or tell them how to get it in a polite and friendly manner.

## **The Power of Anticipating Customer Service Opportunities**

The best companies are the ones that are proactive and the best employees are ones who anticipate the needs of customers. If a rider on your bus is continuously checking the time on his/her watch, it is clear he/she is worried about being late. A good, proactive driver will take the opportunity and assure the rider that the bus is going to be on time without the customer even having to ask. Likewise, if a passenger getting on the bus is looking around for a sign regarding the fare, a good transit operator will provide him/her with that information even before being asked. Exceptional customer service providers will take it a step further and, in addition to looking for any and all unmet needs, will ask passengers what they would like to see done differently to make the service work better for them. Anticipating customer service opportunities leaves customers feeling calm and taken care of and ultimately may avoid a customer becoming agitated, upset or angry. In the long run, being proactive about customer service will make your job easier and improve your relationships with your passengers. ■



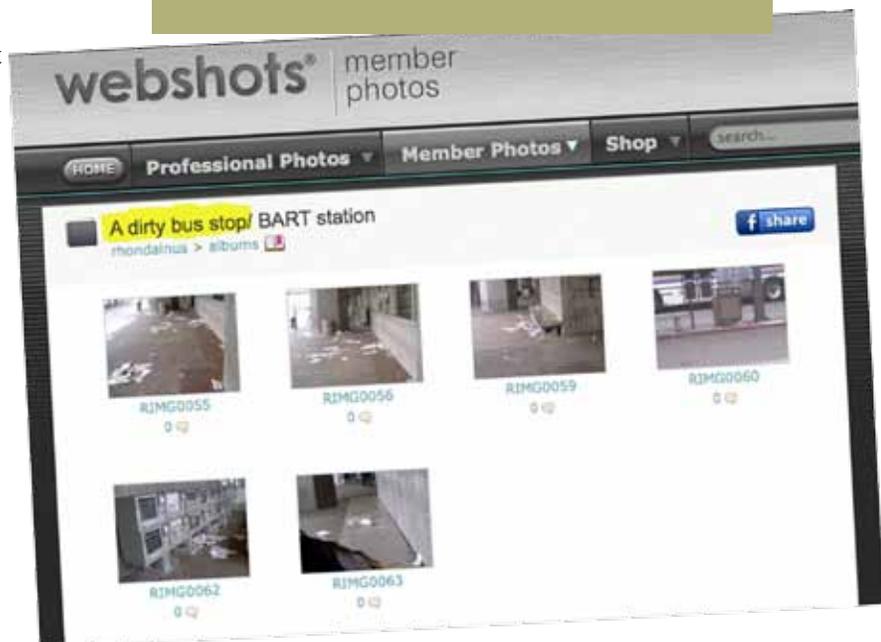


## CHAPTER 3 QUICK QUIZ: TAKING CARE OF YOUR CUSTOMERS

1. Which of the following is correct about older adults:
  - A. Typically expect eye contact
  - B. Appreciate and expect to be treated with courtesy and respect
  - C. Prefer personal contact or telephone customer relations
  - D. Prefer direct conversation to text and email
  - E. All of the above
2. Which of the following is true of younger passengers:
  - A. Prefer less formal interactions
  - B. Expect less eye contact
  - C. Value technology
  - D. Are used to multitasking and expect instant information
  - E. All of the above
3. True or False: Studies show that for all commuters, getting to their destination on time is their primary concern.
  - A. True
  - B. False
4. True or False: Whenever a customer asks a question of anyone in a transit organization, he/she is either expecting the answer or someone to find the answer for him/her.
  - A. True
  - B. False
5. If a rider on your bus is continuously checking the time on his/her watch, it is clear he/she is worried about being late. A good proactive driver will:
  - A. Ignore the passenger
  - B. Speed up
  - C. Assure the rider that the bus is going to be on time (assuming it is on time)

### Did You Know?

*Modern cell phones can connect to social media portals enabling passengers to comment on, compliment or complain about your service to a vast audience... even before they get off your bus.*



## IV: Customer Service Breakdowns

### Why Do We Struggle with Customer Service?

If we're all experts at customer service, why do we struggle with it? Some excuses we may use to justify not providing excellent customer service include:

- Unrealistic schedules
- Customer expectations
- Job stress
- Weather
- Traffic
- Our beliefs and attitudes about customers

Regardless of our reasons or excuses, it is still our job to provide the customer with an excellent experience. Any business you may frequent such as a hotel, video store or butcher shop also has reasons that make it difficult for their employees to provide great customer service; however, as a customer you are probably not interested in hearing those reasons. We expect a great customer experience, period. No one likes to hear excuses.

### Customers and the Questions They Ask

Perhaps you've had this experience: You are driving a bus that is going downtown and there is a big sign right on the front of the bus that reads "Downtown." The bus is also heading in the direction of all the office buildings. Nevertheless, a person boards your bus and asks, "Are we going downtown?" These kinds of questions come up often. You may wonder why people would ask a question when they already have the answer. However, stop for a moment and think. Have you ever asked a question when you already knew the answer?

The reason people ask questions—even when they already know the answer—is because they want affirmation and reassurance. They may be stressed, worried or anxious, and receiving additional affirmation from an authority figure helps to ease their mind. As a transit employee, you are an authority figure on all things pertaining to buses and vans so people look to you for answers. It is part of your responsibility to make sure that customers feel taken care of and to help put them at ease.

There are sure to be times when your first inclination is to answer an obvious question with a wise remark. Resist that temptation. If you are driving the downtown bus and a rider boards the bus and asks, "Is this bus going downtown?" your

instinct may be to say, "What did the big sign on the front of the bus say?" Now this rider still has not been affirmed and the potential exists for the customer to become rude or to file a complaint about you. Conversely, by simply replying, "Yes, ma'am we'll have you downtown in five minutes," and affirming what he/she already knew, you calm the rider and ease his/her mind, providing him/her with an excellent customer experience.

### The Effects of Stress

Stress strongly influences the delivery of good customer service. Working in transit can be a stressful occupation—it is a scheduled environment, you are responsible for the safety of many individuals and you are affected by factors over which you have no control, such as traffic and weather. On an average day you will be faced with a great number of stressors. Though you can't control many of these things, you can control your own level of stress. An effective way to lower the level of stress in your life is to live a healthy lifestyle. Stress outside of the work environment will only decrease your ability to cope with any stress that may arise on the job. It is essential that you come to work:

- Well rested
- Cool
- Calm
- In control
- Respectful



If you're a bus operator who has a 6am start time, going out with friends at night or staying up until 1am watching TV or reading is going to adversely affect your performance at work. Alternatively, if you're a family person with young children in your home, you'll have to take into account that even when you are not working, it is likely that your life is busy and sometimes hectic and take measures to alleviate some of those additional stressors. If you are cool, calm, in control and respectful you will be able to handle any difficult situation that you may encounter. However, if you are already stressed either from your family life or lifestyle, you are more likely to come to work overtired, grumpy, rude or sarcastic.

## Best Practice: Involve Customers in the Solution

*Ask the customer how he/she would like the problem to be solved. If it is a reasonable request, do it. Don't worry, in most cases customer demands are more reasonable than you may imagine. What customers want most is a respectful, courteous response to their concerns.*

## When Things Go Wrong (and Customer Expectations Aren't Met)

As transit staff who interact with customers, you may not fully realize the impact that one customer's negative experience can have. You may think that a dissatisfied customer will simply leave dissatisfied and will likely get over it by the next time he/she needs to use your services. Conversely, you may think that a very upset customer will complain. The truth is, most people actually don't complain. Instead, people remain upset and then tell several other people about their bad experience. For example, if you have a bad meal in a restaurant you may not complain to the manager; however, when your neighbor tells you he's going out to dinner, you may use that as an opportunity to tell him not to visit that particular restaurant. Even if your organization receives few complaints, it does not necessarily mean people are completely satisfied with your service.

The advance of new technologies such as Facebook, Twitter, other websites and even cell phones in general, have also changed the impact of people's complaints. Before the age of cell phones, people would have to go home, look up a number and call to lodge a complaint with one particular person working for the company. In today's world, people can call (or tweet, blog or text) to complain about a dirty bus while sitting on the bus! Additionally, the popularity of social networking sites means that people can complain to a much larger audience via the Internet. The potential impact of a single bad experience has grown exponentially.



## Dealing with Angry Customers

The majority of customers who ride on your bus or van are going to be calm and pleasant people and will exit your vehicle satisfied with the service you provided. You will, however, experience customers who board your bus already in a state of agitation or anger, or who become agitated or angry while aboard your vehicle. The five general attitudes of passengers are:

- Average/calm
- Anxious
- Agitated
- Angry
- Dangerous

While it is unlikely that you will have to deal with angry or dangerous customers very often, it is important to recognize when a customer is agitated and to prevent the situation from escalating. Your actions have the ability to calm angry customers, which in the long run makes your job easier.

## Best Practice: Address Problems Right Away

*No one likes dealing with unpleasant situations and challenging customers, but if you let a complaint fester, it's not going to get any better on its own. First, truly listen to the customer's concern, and then act (not react) using your best judgment.*



## Defusing Conflict

Any time you notice an anxious or agitated customer or you witness a customer's level of agitation getting worse, it is important to defuse the conflict as quickly as possible. Through calming a customer as soon as they become anxious or agitated, you reduce the chance that they will become angry or dangerous. The four steps to defusing conflict are:

### ■ Acknowledge the Emotion

Ignoring an anxious or agitated customer or responding to his/her attitude with rudeness can increase the conflict, potentially putting yourself or other passengers at risk. Simply by acknowledging an anxious customer's emotions, he/she will feel that his/her concerns are heard and that may calm him/her.

### ■ Ask Questions:

Asking questions about why a customer is upset and what you could do to alleviate the anxiety is a good way to calm him/her down. Often times, a customer simply wants to feel heard and like his/her experience is being valued. Simply asking the question, "Is there anything I can do now to improve your experience?" gives the customer an opportunity to feel that he/she is taken care of and this alone can bring a customer back to calmness.

### ■ Don't Escalate or Argue

No matter what, even if a customer is being rude or is in the wrong, never escalate an argument or argue with a customer. If someone speaks rudely to you or accuses you of something that is not your fault, your first response may be to defend yourself or to speak back rudely. Instead, take a deep breath, remember that while you are working your primary responsibility is to serve the customer, and then answer from a place of calmness and understanding.

### ■ Make a Decision That Will Be Most Helpful to the Customer

Provide information that lessens the likelihood of future problems, such as schedules or a one-time free ride.

## Resolving Complaints

Sometimes a customer may come on your bus upset about something totally unrelated to you or the service you are providing. Other times a customer may have a specific complaint about you or your organization. It can be difficult to hear complaints that someone makes about you. A customer may accuse you of being late even if you were simply stuck in traffic that you had no control over or may be upset because the bus never stopped for him/her even though he/she was waiting at the wrong corner. It is human nature to be defensive and to tell the customer, "What did you expect? You weren't even at the right bus stop!" Instead, because your sole priority is to serve the customer, a better approach would be to apologize for the inconvenience, acknowledge his/her frustration and politely tell him/her where the proper location is for catching the bus. By doing these things, you will alleviate potential problems before they arise and leave customers having had a better experience. ■

## Best Practice: Don't Take It Personally

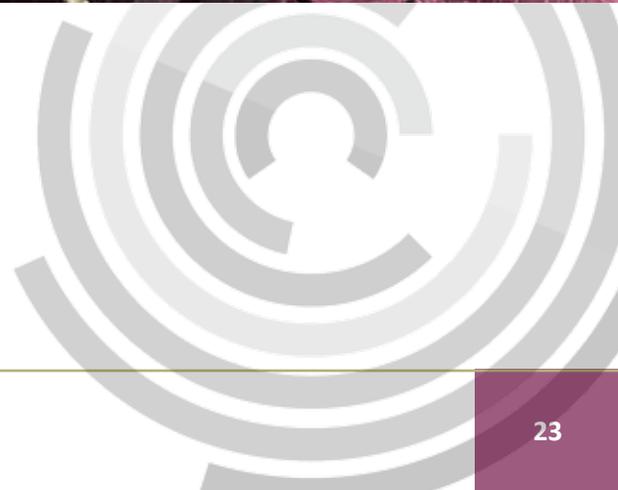
*Chances are that when a customer is directing his/her frustration at you, he/she is actually angry about the situation (the bus being late, for example), not angry with you. Taking things personally just introduces unnecessary emotion into the situation and makes it harder to address the real concern.*

## Test Your Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Knowledge:

**Q** *If a rider arrives with limited mobility, must a paratransit vehicle operator help him/her up and down steps?*

**A** *Yes. Assistance up and down the steps of the vehicle, as well as steps going to and from the vehicle, would be reasonable assistance for someone who needs it due to a disability, assuming other safety policies (such as maintaining effective continuing control of the vehicle) are not compromised.*

*(ADA DOT regulation at 49 C.F.R. § 37.165(f) and 49 C.F.R. Part 37, App. D, § 37.165.*



# Chapter IV Exercises and Quiz

## ARE YOU STRESSED?

How much stress are you under? Evaluate your level of stress by taking this simple quiz.

Answer the following 10 questions based on the following scale:

- 4 Nearly always
- 3 Often
- 2 Sometimes but not often
- 1 Never

- \_\_\_ 1. How often are you so pressed for time that you are unable to finish everything that you need to do?
- \_\_\_ 2. How often do you feel confused because so much is happening all at the same time, and you can't take it all in?
- \_\_\_ 3. How often do you feel that you have too many responsibilities?
- \_\_\_ 4. How often do you wish you could get more help from others to get everything done?
- \_\_\_ 5. How often do you feel that the expectations people have of you are too much?
- \_\_\_ 6. How often do you feel that your obligations are overwhelming?
- \_\_\_ 7. How often does your job (or worrying about the demands of your job) infringe on your free time?
- \_\_\_ 8. How often do you feel depressed because there are so many things that need your attention?
- \_\_\_ 9. How often does it feel like your to-do list is never-ending?
- \_\_\_ 10. How often do you skip meals to be able to finish tasks?

\_\_\_ Your total score

## How stressed are you?

### 10–20 points

You handle stress well and are generally calm, cool and collected.

### 20–25 points

You typically experience moderate anxiety and may occasionally struggle to listen and respond to customer needs empathically.

### 25–30 points

You experience significant anxiety and may get angry often. You may have a tendency to be confrontational.

### 30–35 points

You may experience disproportionate anxiety and anger. You may have recurring, serious conflicts with others. You may benefit from increased rest, relaxation and exercise.

### 35–40 points

You experience a very high level of stress and may have stress-related illnesses. Stressful situations may prompt extreme anger or even cause you to lose control. You would likely benefit from increased rest, relaxation and exercise.

*Note: This quiz is not a medical diagnostic tool and is intended for informational purposes only.*





## V. Conclusion

Whether you have been working as a transit employee for five months or 15 years, it is never too late to improve the way you interact with customers. Even if you are a friendly, welcoming person who smiles and enjoys interacting with customers, there is always room to be more proactive and anticipate customer needs. If you've always been challenged by customer service, it's never too late to improve your skills.

Remember that providing exceptional customer service requires a commitment on the part of each and every employee of an organization—including you. Furthermore, keep in mind that the way that

you interact with your fellow co-workers has a direct impact on the way that you treat customers. Great customer service requires a commitment from every member of your organization to treat each other with respect.

The next time that you are faced with a challenging customer or situation, look at it as an opportunity to demonstrate your skills—your skills in caring for customers and making it your responsibility to ensure that all their needs are met. Not only will you be excelling at your job, but your actions will reflect positively on the entire organization. ■





