Building Blocks to Customer Service Excellence

Upon successful completion of this article, the pharmacist should be able to build on the competitive advantage offered by community pharmacy by implementing a training system that ensures employees provide world-class customer service.

1. Understand what customer service excellence means in the context of a pharmacy.
2. Identify the qualities needed in pharmacy staff.
3. Communicate expectations to staff members.
4. Create a basic training manual that ensures consistency of service level provided at the pharmacy.

Introduction

All other things being equal, customers will make purchases at your pharmacy regardless of how well they are served. However, their loyalty to your pharmacy and the frequency of their visits is forever affected by even one unsatisfactory experience. Customers who are left unimpressed by their experience are less likely to return, and when they do return they tend to purchase fewer items. You and your staff have the ability to influence customers’ shopping habits simply by the manner in which you conduct yourselves.

This training module lays the groundwork for providing customer service excellence at your pharmacy. You will learn the typical qualities of staff members who provide good service. You will be guided how to communicate your expectations to your staff. You will also learn how to create a basic training guideline that can be used to orient new and existing staff to your pharmacy’s “way of doing business.” This information will prepare you to recruit and train the staff your pharmacy needs to succeed.

The skills presented in this module are aimed primarily at front-end staff: clerks, merchandisers, sales assistants, and others. Pharmacy technicians and staff pharmacists require a specialized set of skills that goes beyond this module’s focus. Customer service excellence, however, occurs (or does not occur) in every pharmacy department, no matter the job title. We recommend that you share your training guidelines with every member of your staff to ensure a common understanding and shared purpose.

You Control the Customer’s Experience

Providing good service in the pharmacy can be achieved through two different approaches, both of which you can directly control. One set of standards (Active Standards) has to do with behavior and the other (Passive Standards) relates to the image presented through the pharmacy’s appearance.

Active standards can be summarized by one overriding concept: everything done and said in the pharmacy makes an impression – either positive or negative – on the customer. A friendly greeting offered to each customer as he or she enters naturally conveys the appearance that staff is eager to serve, and it sets the customer at ease. If, on the other hand, staff members lean on the check-out counter with an attitude of boredom and fail to acknowledge a customer’s presence, the entire pharmacy appears disinterested in making a sale.

“Active” Standards of Customer Service Excellence, Conveyed by All Staff Members

- Attentiveness
- Attitude of genuine caring
- Courtesy
- Pride in doing a good job
- Strong social skills
- Trustworthiness
- Confidentiality
- Knowing what you don’t know
- Professional appearance and demeanor
- Product knowledge
- Strong communication skills
“Passive” Standards of Customer Service Excellence

- Neatness and cleanliness of pharmacy
- Availability of products, no out-of-stocks
- Store merchandising and display
- Hours of operation
- Access to store personnel
- Convenience of shopping experience

The Right Personality for the Job

The list of Active Standards can be subdivided into even more specific categories encompassing “personality traits” and “professional presentation.” Part of the reason you choose certain people to represent your pharmacy has less to do with professional qualifications than it does with one’s natural ability to interact successfully with the type of people who shop in the pharmacy.

For example, a person who is by nature outgoing and friendly has a better chance of enjoying pharmacy work because he or she is interested in people. On the other hand, a person who is oriented toward computer-based work or product merchandising may be uncomfortable interacting with a steady stream of customers. Learn to recognize the qualities necessary to working with people:

1. **Approachability** – Staff must appear friendly; they must have an outgoing nature and be willing to listen to customers’ needs, perceive needs where no overt communication is made, and be ready to find a means of meeting those needs.

2. **Discretion** – Pharmacy customers have needs that are related to health conditions and concerns. HIPAA aside, pharmacy staff members must be sensitive to customers’ sensitive health issues and be prepared to exercise confidentiality and empathy when dealing with customers.

3. **Courtesy** – “Treat customers as you would like to be treated” is an excellent standard to set for all pharmacy employees.

4. **Work Ethic** – A lack of customers in the pharmacy should not equate to “free time” for employees. The Passive Standards listed above can and should be observed by all employees during the ebb and flow of each business day. Pharmacy staff members all have a responsibility to ensure the pharmacy is neat, clean, well-stocked, and easy to shop.

5. **Product Knowledge** – Not every pharmacy employee needs to understand everything about products sold in the front-end. However, a basic understanding of the different over-the-counter medicine departments, subcategories, product types, brands, and their aisle location is necessary for staff members to be of optimum service to customers.

What Do Customers Want from a Community Pharmacy?

To create a comprehensive list of everything a pharmacy customer may want or expect is probably an impossible task, given that wants and expectations are as varied as the people who regularly shop pharmacies. However, virtually every customer has the same core set of expectations from a pharmacy and its employees. These include a pharmacy that

- stocks the most effective and popular over-the-counter medicines
- makes available educational materials regarding prescription and non-prescription medicines
- maintains convenient business hours
- is clean, bright and well cared for
- sets fair prices that are easy to find on each product
- offers customers good value
Basic customer expectations also include pharmacy employees who

- express understanding and empathy
- are friendly and easy to talk to
- listen attentively and respond politely
- ask effective and pertinent questions to determine a customer’s need
- instinctively understand customers’ reticence to discuss personal health issues
- offer to help rather than waiting to be asked
- check the back room for additional product if the shelf is empty
- do not make customers feel rushed
- are always willing to go the “extra mile”
- demonstrate respect for themselves and their customers by maintaining a professional appearance
- are knowledgeable about the products they sell
- exercise good manners and courtesy
- resolve complaints quickly and without argument
- say “thank you” when a transaction is completed

Pharmacy is About People

Notice that the list of expectations regarding pharmacy employees is more than twice as long as the list of expectations regarding the pharmacy itself. This discrepancy merely underscores the impact that pharmacy employees have on the success of the pharmacy’s operations. Any pharmacy can easily stock the right products and keep its doors open during convenient hours. The pharmacy that answers those needs and employs a top-flight staff is the pharmacy that distinguishes itself from all of its competitors.

Customers Notice the Difference

Today’s customers are better educated and more discriminating than customers of the 1990s, 1980s, or any time before.

Regardless of the era or strength of the economy, customers’ tastes and preferences, as well as business competition, are always changing. Pharmacies that fail to keep up with changing trends miss sales opportunities. Adapting to the needs and wants of customers may mean having to stay open during hours that are more convenient for the customer, even if they seem “non-traditional” for pharmacy. Or, you may need to offer a wider variety of goods and services to attract and retain customers. To have a competitive edge – that is, the ability to surpass what your competition is offering – pharmacies have to stay ahead of what its customers want and expect.

Above all, what customers of retail outlets indicate they most want is good service – and “good service” comprises all the bullet points expressed earlier. Studies have shown that 68 percent of customers will not return to a shop if they have had a bad experience with an employee. Where customers are more educated about products and services than ever before, they are just as savvy when it comes to the quality of service provided. Given the array of shopping alternatives available to customers, you cannot afford for your staff to be the reason a customer never returns to your pharmacy.

Customers Are Never an Interruption

Consider the typical pharmacy shopper: a female with children and job responsibilities. She enters the pharmacy mid-day and begins browsing the cough/cold section directly in front of the pharmacy counter. An employee is in the midst of setting a small display of products on the end of that same aisle. Of the following choices, how would you hope your employee would treat this customer?

a.) With a smile and eye contact;
b.) By saying “hello” and asking to help her find something;
c.) By walking around to the next aisle to continue a conversation with another employee;
d.) By continuing to work on the end-cap display, but at the same time turning in the general direction of the customer so as to appear approachable should assistance be needed.
All of these choices except C are acceptable and effective, depending upon the circumstances. Whatever accomplishes the goal of acknowledging the customer and making her feel comfortable is effective. Ahead of every other responsibility it is the staff’s job to ensure customers come first. That means leaving aside stocking shelves or side conversations when a customer is in the pharmacy. Customers are the reason the pharmacy is in business – they are never an interruption.

**There is No Such Thing as “Down Time”**

As already mentioned, the pharmacy’s appearance is as important to forming a positive impression in the minds of customers as the behavior of staff members.

First and foremost it is essential that the pharmacy be kept clean and neat. Dusty shelves or products, streaks on the windows, burned out or missing light bulbs, a dull and dirty floor or a jumbled and disorganized array of products all convey the impression of a pharmacy that is not well cared for. A messy shopping environment undermines all efforts of staff to be friendly and professional.

In similar fashion, display shelves that lack an adequate stock of products indicate a pharmacy that is not ready to serve its customers’ needs. Out-of-stocks hurt the pharmacy in two ways: 1.) the pharmacy cannot profit from what it does not have available to sell and 2.) it makes the pharmacy appear neglected. There is a specific logic to pharmacy merchandising that has been proven to draw customers’ attention and increase sales. Out-of-stocks are a guaranteed way of drawing negative attention.

Hold all staff members accountable for contributing to the cleanliness of your pharmacy and the merchandising standards. When the customer stream is light, encourage employees to walk the floors, re-face products on the shelves (i.e., line them up neatly), dust products and shelves, and re-affix signage that has fallen askew.

**You Must Tell Them What You Want Them to Know**

In most cases, your staff wants to do a good job for you and your pharmacy. Whether they have worked for you for five years or are brand new to the job, communication of expectations is critical to eliciting the kind of behavior you want to see. There is no short-cut to this step. You must be clear, specific, and thorough when telling your employees what you expect them to do, to say, how to behave, and how to react in a variety of circumstances. Of course, employees with exceptionally good judgment are an instant asset and generally require little or no instruction or supervision. However, make it a practice never to assume that your employees know what is expected of them. The best way to accomplish this communication is through a written training manual, no matter how brief, and verbal reinforcement of its contents.

**A Suggested Outline for a Basic Pharmacy Staff Training Manual**

1. Bring your best behavior to the pharmacy.
   - Leave your personal problems and concerns at the door.
   - Dress appropriately (provide clear guidelines regarding what is acceptable dress).
   - Practice courtesy at all times, as you would with a guest in your own home.

2. Understand pharmacy customers.
   - Pharmacy shoppers are likely to be dealing with a health condition or need; practice discretion when discussing these needs with customers.
   - There is no such thing as a “prescription only” customer or a “front-end shopper.” All customers who come through the door are potential customers of either the pharmacy or the front-end.
   - Take note of what customers are saying about the pharmacy, both good and bad. All comments are helpful to the pharmacy owner/manager in improving the pharmacy’s service.

3. Know the products on the shelves of the front-end.
   - Memorize the departmental signage.
   - Choose at least two departments each week and browse their contents to become familiar with what is available, especially new products.
Look up or ask about words you don't understand: “acetaminophen,” “cough suppressant,” “antihistamine.” While it is not your job to counsel patients on product choice, it is always helpful to understand the products sold in the pharmacy.

4. What to do during “down” time.
   - There is no such thing as “down time.”
   - When no (or very few) customers are in the pharmacy, find something to clean and clean it.
   - When walking the floor, look for products to straighten (“face”) on the shelves. There is always something that a previous customer has knocked askew.
   - Look for missing price stickers and replace them.
   - Watch for out-of-stocks and report them to the person responsible for ordering.

5. “Do unto others.”
   - Customers in the pharmacy come first, ahead of customers on the phone and certainly ahead of conversations with other employees.
   - Be friendly. Be approachable.
   - Be helpful. If you don’t know the answer to a question, offer to find someone else who can help.

Useful Web Sites
   - www.DaleCarnegie.com
   - www.inc.com (search for “customer service”)
   - www.successories.com

Case 1
Maria E. graduated from pharmacy school in 2002 and immediately went to work as a staff pharmacist in her father’s 40-year-old family pharmacy, Community Drug & Sundry. The pharmacy’s location and customer base were strong, but increasing competition from pharmacy chains and the local grocery store’s pharmacy made it evident that Community Drug & Sundry needed to update its business practices in order to attract and retain new customers.

In 2007, Maria’s father retired and left the pharmacy’s operations in her hands. While Maria was excited to take on the responsibilities of a business owner in addition to a practicing pharmacist, she could see that her pharmacy needed work. It was beyond her budget to add the much-needed addition to the pharmacy’s prescription area, and she was not yet prepared to offer the free delivery service that she knew would benefit many of her loyal customers. Maria did recognize that changes to her staff could reap immediate rewards. She believed these changes could be made with minimal cost and began to search for ways to “re-inspire” her staff to serve their customers differently.

On Maria’s staff were one pharmacist (in addition to herself), two part-time pharmacy technicians, and four front-end sales assistants. All of these staff members had previously worked for her father and were accustomed to the “old way” of doing business. Not wanting to alienate these faithful, long-term employees, Maria devised a plan of several bi-weekly “in-service” training sessions. Each of these sessions dealt with a specific topic:

1. Who are the pharmacy’s current customers and potential new customers?
2. What do you like about your own shopping experiences at various retailers? What do you dislike?
3. How can your own shopping experiences help improve how we serve our customers?
4. Who is more important, current long-term customers or new customers? Answer: both!
5. What should we do when business is slow?
6. How can we make more sales in the front-end through suggestions at the pharmacy counter?

Maria led each of the sessions herself, drawing largely on her experiences as a retail cashier while in high school and college. She structured each session as a friendly, informal discussion among the employees and served refreshments to her staff while all gathered around the break-room table.
The results of this “re-training” created a new zeal in several of Maria’s employees to see and serve the pharmacy’s customers differently. One employee who prided herself on knowing the names of all of the regular customers – and who typically ignored “new” or shorter-term customers – realized that she was hurting the pharmacy by not getting to know the newer shoppers. Another employee, one who had worked for Maria’s father for 20 years, did not like the new approach and quit her job. Maria was disappointed but also excited by the opportunity to replace this employee with a new hire at a lower wage.

One year after the re-training, Community Drug & Sundry had gained more than two dozen new customers. Increased front-end sales, made in large part through suggestive selling at the pharmacy counter, had taken some of the pressure off the prescription department to carry the pharmacy’s sales. The new life breathed into the old pharmacy allowed Maria to begin to offer free delivery service on a limited basis, with an eye toward expanding the service in the future.

Case 2
Fred S. had been a pharmacist for 30 years and had owned his own pharmacy for half of that time. He had no prior retail or business experience – he had moved directly from pharmacy school into the role of staff pharmacist in a mid-sized chain operation. His pharmacy school had not offered any management courses to complement the science of pharmacy practice. As a result, he did not know where to start when it came time to train new employees. Typically, he left the training to more seasoned employees who generally confined their teaching to how to use the cash register.

Uncertain where or how to begin, Fred called upon the only experience he had – as a customer of other retail operations. He began to take notes when he visited the grocery store, the local club store, the mass retailer, and even the auto parts store. Most helpful were his visits to the chain drug stores active in the area of Fred’s pharmacy. He observed how they treated their customers in the front-end and in the prescription department. He sketched their floor plans in his notebook, made notes about their product selection, and charted things like their hours of operation and location. Fred studied his own competition in order to find ways he could improve his own pharmacy. He also read books on the business of retailing and designed what he thought was a good compendium of helpful hints for working in his pharmacy.

Over a time period of several months, Fred talked informally with each of his employees about his observations of other retail outlets. He described both his good and bad experiences. Some of his employees took an active interest in what Fred talked about. Some even began to share their own shopping experiences, and to put into practice the good and the bad of what they observed elsewhere. Other employees did not take the “hint” and continued to fail to acknowledge customers, to talk on the phone while ringing up sales, and to shout to other employees from across the store. Fred was pleased with the progress made by his more observant employees, but did not know how to improve the performance of the others.

When it came time to hire a new full-time cashier, Fred made certain to look for someone with retail experience outside of a pharmacy environment. Previously, he had always favored employees who had worked in another small pharmacy. The experience offered by this new employee had a positive effect on overall staff performance. However, Fred could see that he needed a more formal training program and perhaps even a mission statement for his pharmacy so that all employees understood where they fit in and what they were contributing to.

About the Author
The retailing experts at Hamacher Resource Group combine the art of creative and strategic development with the science of market analytics to enhance the profitability of health, beauty and wellness manufacturers, distributors and retailers, including more than 20,000 independent pharmacies operating nationwide. Pioneers in category management and offering strategic business development solutions including store assessments and insights for performance improvement, objective data analysis, targeted market research, creative marketing services, retailing strategies and more, HRG is headquartered in Milwaukee.