



The importance of excellent customer service

A guide to the British Standard for customer service (BS 8477:2014)

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Good customer service is important and can keep you loyal to a brand. BS 8477 is a code of practice for companies that value their customers, helping them to deliver a consistently high level of service.

Eight out of 10 people say that customer service can influence their choice of brand, according to a 2013 Which? survey. Four in 10 would be willing to pay more for better service and 86 per cent of respondents would leave an organization that treated them poorly.

Rising customer expectations, and the growing trend to share negative experiences online, is putting pressure on companies to raise their game. Smart organizations understand that good service is crucial to their success, helping them to keep existing customers and win new ones.

Satisfied customers: the basics

What is BS 8477?

BS 8477:2014 is a voluntary code of practice, published by BSI, to help companies deliver customer service that meets, or exceeds, customer expectations.

It was developed by a group of industry experts and consumer representatives. First published in 2007, the standard was revised in 2014 to bring it up-to-date. For example, it now includes guidance on using social media to reflect how modern businesses and consumers interact.

What does the standard cover?

BS 8477 can be used by any UK organization that provides products or services to the public and interacts with its customers in some way.

It's intended for organizations of all types and sizes, from large corporations to small businesses. For example, it could be used by banks, government departments, retailers or local traders.

It doesn't cover sales practices, as these are covered by law (and dealt with by Trading Standards).

What is 'good' customer service?

Good customer service is about understanding the needs of different customers, keeping promises and delivering consistently high standards. BS 8477 defines the key principles of good customer service as:

- Organizational commitment to a customer service culture
- Provision of clear, relevant and accessible information
- Well trained, customer-focused staff
- Good communication
- Quick resolution of customers' problems
- Effective use of customer feedback to help resolve common problems

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Satisfied customers: the details

Organizations that comply with BSI's code of practice should:

Build a customer service culture

- Develop their own customer service strategy and appoint a senior manager to take responsibility for it
- Make plans to achieve the strategy – by setting goals and identifying the people and other resources (e.g. technology) needed
- Make sure that all staff are aware of the strategy and committed to its values

Make it easy for customers to get in touch

- Make information accessible to as many customers as possible by offering a range of formats and different methods of contact – e.g. face-to-face, phone or website
- Give clear contact details in correspondence and online so that customers can get in touch with the relevant person or department quickly and easily

Communicate clearly

- Present information clearly and simply – at the time it's most useful to customers
- Reply quickly to customer contacts, or give information about when a full response will arrive

Ensure that staff are customer-focused

- Assign clear roles and responsibilities to customer service staff
- Employ staff that:
 - Possess the appropriate behaviour, attitude, knowledge and skills to deliver high quality customer service
 - Are responsive to the individual needs of their customers
- Provide staff with ongoing training and support

Deal effectively with problems

- Encourage staff to have empathy with the customer and take a proactive approach to solving their problems
- Where possible, give customer service staff the resources and authority to deal with problems themselves
- Give staff the flexibility to find the correct solution for a particular customer, rather than being limited by 'set responses'
- Keep customers informed by detailing options available, actions to be taken and timescales involved

Listen to feedback

Encourage feedback from staff and customers to:

- Understand real customer experiences
- Identify common problems at an early stage
- Take appropriate action to resolve problems and prevent recurrence

Frequently asked questions

Q. What is BSI?

A. BSI is the UK's National Standards Body. It's been developing standards for more than 100 years to make products and services safer and better for consumers. Standards set out good practice and guidelines for organizations to follow.

Q. Must all organizations that provide customer service comply with the standard?

A. No, the standard is voluntary. Organizations that choose to use the standard are demonstrating a commitment to delivering good quality customer service.

Q. If an organization doesn't follow the standard is it breaking the law?

A. No, it's not a legal requirement to follow the standard. But if an organization claims to comply with the standard, then doesn't, Trading Standards may be able to take action. Consumers can get in touch with their local Trading Standards via the Citizens Advice Consumer Helpline (see 'Useful information'). Even if an organization doesn't claim compliance, in the event of a serious complaint or incident, the standard could be used in a court of law to provide a benchmark of best practice.

Q. What consumer rights do I have?

A. Customers have certain rights by law. Companies providing goods and services must do so:

- With reasonable care and skill
- In a reasonable time (if there is no specific time agreed)
- For a reasonable charge (if no fixed price was set in advance)

If you think that an organization isn't abiding by the law, contact the Citizens Advice Consumer Helpline who can give advice and will refer your case to Trading Standards, if necessary.

Q. Where can I find out more about my consumer rights?

A. The Which? and Citizens Advice websites both offer detailed information about consumer rights (see 'Useful information'). Local Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) can also give advice about specific issues.

Q. Where can I find a copy of BS 8477?

A. Many libraries and universities can access reference copies of British Standards for you, or copies can be bought from BSI at bsigroup.com/shop.

Useful information

BSI

For information about standards
0845 086 9001

bsigroup.com

For information about consumer-focused standards
bsigroup.com/consumers

Citizens Advice

For advice about consumer rights and details of your local CAB

03454 04 05 06 (consumer helpline)

adviceguide.org.uk/consumer

Trading Standards

Enforcement of consumer related legislation

tradingstandards.gov.uk

Which?

For information about consumer rights and recent reports on customer service

which.co.uk

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By Royal Charter