Chapter 2

Customer Service Skills for User Support Agents

At a Glance

Instructor's Manual Table of Contents

- Overview

- Chapter Objectives

- Teaching Tips

- Quick Quizzes

- Class Discussion Topics

- Additional Projects

- Additional Resources

- Key Terms

Lecture Notes

Overview

In this chapter, students will learn about communication skills, including how to be an effective listener, how to overcome the challenges of telephone communication, and how to develop an effective personal communication style. Students will learn strategies for dealing with difficult situations and users. An overview of personality types is provided, and students will learn how these personality types may cause communications issues. The chapter concludes with an introduction to Web 2.0-based user support.

Chapter Objectives

In this chapter, students will learn about:
- The importance of communication and interpersonal skills and customer service relationships for support agents
- Reasons support agents must listen and read carefully
- How agents build and communicate understanding
- Important aspects of effective speaking and nonverbal communication
- How support agents develop a personal communication style
- Strategies support agents use for telephone communications
- How support agents develop an incident management strategy
- How developing an understanding of different personality types and work styles can help an agent
- Strategies support agents use to handle difficult clients
- Guidelines for client-friendly communications on user support Web sites
- How to build excellent customer service

Teaching Tips

Communication and Customer Service Skills

1. Discuss the importance of communication skills when providing customer support.

2. Define the term **customer-service ethic** and explain why organizations place so much emphasis on excellent customer service. Review the actions that customer service workers should take to support the organization's customer-service ethic:

   - Provide clients with the information, service, or solutions they need, if there is a reasonable way to do so.
   - Explain to a client what they can do for him or her if the client's problem cannot be resolved immediately.
   - Treat clients and potential clients with respect and courtesy.

- Communicate to clients how long they are likely to be on hold, how long it will be before they receive a return call or email, and how long it may take to provide information or solve a problem.
- Return phone calls or emails when promised, even if just to report that no progress has yet been made.

Teaching Tip	Ask students to relate experiences in which customer service issues either made them happier or more dissatisfied with a particular product or service.

3. Discuss the importance of the essential communication skills: listening, understanding, and responding.

4. Review the six types of listening skills in Table 2-1. Examine the tips and barriers for effective listening listed in Figure 2-2.

5. Discuss strategies for building understanding. Make sure that students understand the definition of **empathy**.

Teaching Tip	Stress the importance of empathy by asking students to give some examples of what they would consider to be an empathetic response.

6. Describe the following four aspects of an effective response:
   - Use a sincere greeting.
   - Use scripts appropriately.
   - Use tone and style effectively.
   - Recognize the importance of nonverbal communication.

7. Discuss the definition of a **script** and how it can be both a training aid and a helpful tool.

8. Review the **nonverbal behaviors** listed in Table 2-2.

Develop an Effective Personal Communication Style

1. Explain these tips for an effective **personal communication style**:
   - Use clear, succinct speech.
   - Avoid using empty phrases.
   - Phrase communications positively.

Teaching Tip	Ask students to review the following list of positive phrases: www.callcentrehelper.com/the-top-25-positive-words-and-phrases-1847.htm.

Quick Quiz 1

1. Communication is a process that involves ____, ____, and _____.
   Answer: listening, understanding, responding

2. (True/False) Support agents who can empathize with a user are able to understand the problem or question from the user's point of view.
   Answer: True

3. What type of listening is involved with having a complete and accurate understanding of the user's problem?
   Answer: comprehensive

4. A prepared sequence of questions and/or statements that assists with handling complex problems or difficult users is called a(n) ____.
   Answer: script

5. (True/False) A nonverbal behavior could be a facial expression, body language, or voice quality.
   Answer: True

Special Challenges of Telephone Communication

1. Discuss some of the challenges of telephone communication.

2. Review the suggested dialog in Table 2-3, which helps agents in specific situations.

3. Have students review the role-playing scenario on page 66 and discuss whether or not they think it portrays effective communication.

Develop an Incident Management Strategy

1. Define the term **incident management strategy**. Review the four goals of incident management:
   - Provide the user with the information he or she needs.
   - Manage stress levels for both the user and the support agent.
   - Ensure that the incident progresses from start to finish in an effective and efficient way.
   - Make the user more self-reliant.

2. Discuss the resources for building an incident management strategy. Review the guidelines for incident management that include:
   - Ask goal-directed diagnostic questions.
   - Be honest.
   - Say "I don't know" when you don't.
   - Apologize when appropriate.
   - Say "Thank you."
   - Use incident management, not user management, techniques.
   - Teach self-reliance.

Customer Service and Personality Types

1. Categorize the four dimensions of personality measured on the **Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)** personality analysis:
   - Where do you direct your energy? Introvert (I) versus Extrovert (E)
   - How do you process information? Sensing (S) versus Intuition (N)
   - How do you make decisions? Thinking (T) versus Feeling (F)
   - How do you organize your life? Judging (J) versus Perceiving (P)

Teaching Tip	Students can take the MBTI test to discover their own personality type: www.humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/JTypes2.asp.

2. Explain how the MBTI helps workers understand themselves and their coworkers. Describe the issues that arise between the most common personality types in user support work and the other personality types that might be more common in the end user community.

Strategies for Difficult Clients and Incidents

1. Describe a **difficult client**. Discuss strategies for dealing with the following types of users and situations:
   - Users who complain
   - Contacts by "**power users**"
   - Incidents that get off track
   - Users who are upset or angry
   - Users who are abusive
   - Users who are reluctant to respond
   - Users who won't stop responding

Client-Friendly Web Sites and Web 2.0

1. Discuss why the use of **support Web sites** has been growing in recent years, and the types of information available on a user support Web site such as FAQs and knowledge databases.

2. Define **Web 2.0** and provide examples of Web 2.0 sites and applications. Be sure to include a description of a **user forum**, **thread**, and **blog**.

3. Discuss the importance of defining the purposes of a support Web site, which could include:
    *   Provide product information.
    *   Take sale orders.
    *   Facilitate access to technical support.
    *   Provide software updates and downloads.
    *   Communicate with end users.
    *   Encourage communication and collaboration among users.
    *   Provide user forums and blogs as communication media.
    *   Provide links to related sites.

4. Discuss the following criteria that are important to consider when building a support Web site:
    *   Content
    *   Organization
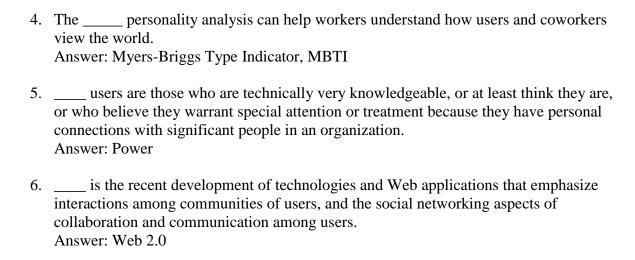   *   Format
    *   Mechanics

Comprehensive Client Services

1. Describe the ways that an organization can ensure excellence in client services.

Quick Quiz 2

1. (True/False) Because a caller cannot see the agent on the other end of the phone, nonverbal aspects of communication are unimportant in a telephone support call.
    Answer: False

2. (True/False) An incident management strategy is a collection of tools, techniques, and activities that successful support agents use to move through an incident effectively and efficiently, from the initial greeting to the end of the incident.
    Answer: True

3. To create _____, support agents explain a solution so that users understand the reasons they encountered a problem and how to fix it.
    Answer: self-reliance

4. The _____ personality analysis can help workers understand how users and coworkers view the world.
   Answer: Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, MBTI

5. ____ users are those who are technically very knowledgeable, or at least think they are, or who believe they warrant special attention or treatment because they have personal connections with significant people in an organization.
   Answer: Power

6. ____ is the recent development of technologies and Web applications that emphasize interactions among communities of users, and the social networking aspects of collaboration and communication among users.
   Answer: Web 2.0

Class Discussion Topics

1. Why are listening skills so important for user support workers? How can user support workers improve their listening skills?

2. What strategies should workers use to overcome the challenges of telephone-based communication? What about communication over the Internet, such as support by chat?

Additional Projects

1. Have students visit a support site such as http://support.dell.com/ or http://support.microsoft.com/ and identify the types of user support resources offered on the site.

2. Have students conduct a search to locate information on how to deal with a difficult customer in an online business and then write a short summary of the recommendations. Two possibilities are www.bukisa.com/articles/106844_business-dealing-with-difficult-customers-in-online-business and www.woopidoo.com/articles/bond/difficult-customers.htm.

Additional Resources

1. Listening skills exercises:
   http://ezinearticles.com/?2-Easy-Exercises-to-Improve-Listening-Skills&id=845402

2. Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Web site:
   www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/

3. Web 2.0 article:
   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0

Key Terms

- **Blog**—A feature of a Web site where a writer posts messages to which members of a user community are invited to comment.
- **Customer-service ethic**—An organization-wide commitment, shared by everyone from top management to operational staff, that client relations and client satisfaction are the most important aspects of a business.
- **Difficult client**—A user who requires special handling strategies because he or she is angry, uncommunicative, rude, or abusive, or exhibits other hard-to-handle behaviors.
- **Empathy**—An understanding of and identification with a user's problem situation, thoughts, and feelings. A support agent who can empathize with a user understands the problem or question from the client's perspective and why it is important to the client.
- **Greeting**—The first few sentences in a support incident that introduce an agent. The greeting forms the basis for the first impression of the support service by the user, and gets the incident-resolution process started on a positive note.
- **Incident management strategy**—A collection of tools, techniques, and strategies that support agents use during an incident to move effectively and efficiently from the initial greeting to the conclusion of the incident.
- **Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)**—A personality analysis commonly used in business and industry to identify worker personality and work style preferences.
- **Nonverbal behavior**—Facial expression, body language, and the tone and style of communication. Nonverbal communication behavior may be more important than the specific words used in a communication.
- **Personal communication style**—The result of a series of decisions each support agent makes about how he or she communicates with end users.
- **Power user**—A user who is technically knowledgeable (or believes that he or she is), or who may have a relationship with an organization that he or she feels warrants special attention to his or her incident.
- **Script**—A prepared sequence of questions and statements that support agents can use to handle parts of an incident; a script may include decision points and branches to handle different situations.
- **Self-reliance**—A goal of support service providers that seeks to increase user self-sufficiency and reduce a user's dependence on support services.
- **Support Web site**—A Web site devoted to providing clients with product information, software downloads, support staff contacts, and a sales channel. Support Web sites are a cost-effective method to communicate with users, but should be designed to be client-friendly.
- **Thread**—Commentary on a single topic posted on a Web forum to which several members may contribute comments; usually organized by date with the oldest messages first.
- **User forum**—A feature of a Web site where various discussions are posted to which members of a user community may contribute. User forums emphasize the collaborative nature of the Web as a way to encourage interaction and collaboration among users.
- **Web 2.0**—The recent development of technologies and Web applications that emphasize the social networking aspects of collaboration and communication among users. Web 2.0 emphasizes interactive use of the Web.