



Checklist and guide:

- Phrases to listen out for and eliminate from customer service responses

We know that beginning every interaction with a positive, constructive or empathetic response will encourage people to listen, engage and be more open to any suggestions or solutions we put forward. Whereas the opposite is true when we respond with standard, overused and negative phrases which instantly raise doubt that we will be able to provide the customer with the help and reassurance they are looking for.

Choosing our words carefully is essential for developing a positive, constructive and solution-focused response to anything that comes our way – and this includes avoiding unhelpful stock phrases that disappoint and can set both ourselves and our customers up for a negative experience. For instance, I'm sure we can all fill in the final word of this standard phrase as we've probably heard it many times before: "Unfortunately I can't do that, it's against company". Phrases like this lack sophistication in service delivery, lack ownership and responsibility and miss the opportunity to truly explain the reasons for being unable to do exactly what the customer is asking for. Surprisingly this, and other stock phrases are still heard when we evaluate service interactions.

Being aware of your team's approach to the customer in the phrases they use from the moment the conversation begins will provide you with invaluable insight. This will allow you to endorse any positives you may hear and forge a plan to support and develop the improvements required for everyone to demonstrate consistent use of positive, solution-focused language.

- Listening in to everyday interactions... what do you hear?

When you listen in to your team members' everyday conversations with customers and colleagues, particularly the first thing they say in response to the other person's query, feedback, or criticism, what do you hear? Is it positively phrased and encouraging, reassuring and sincere, or does it leave room for uncertainty and possibly even a complete lack of options? Is it clear from their phrasing that they are taking ownership and responsibility for finding a good way forward with the other person, or are they looking for any opportunity to veer away from and avoid the situation, or to pass the buck?

In recent work, our researchers have come across several clear examples of some of the negative and unhelpful responses that should be eliminated from our responses when greeting and working with customers and colleagues to deliver high quality, customer-focused service.

	Phrases to eliminate	Considerations – why we recommend finding a better way	Could this happen in your team?
1	“Can I take your policy number / address?” (when given as the first response)	There is an opportunity to build a relationship by being personable and asking for a customer’s name first.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	“Unfortunately...” (and anything that follows)	The only thing that follows ‘unfortunately’ is bad news! Find ways to eliminate such words from customer service language and focus on what is possible to keep the customer open and listening.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	“I have to share this information with you because it is part of our process / it’s against company policy / it’s in our terms and conditions”	There will always be better reasons to explain situations to a customer than falling back on process, policy or terms.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	“I’m just doing my job”	Are there things the team needs to deal with that elicit a reaction from the customer which then leads to this response? Investigate what these are and see if a better way to explain or a better service could be offered.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	“You’ll have to...” (followed by something the customer has to do for themselves)	Sometimes we need customers to take action for themselves. This phrase can be replaced by more collaborative language, for example: ‘May I make a suggestion? To move this forward quickly, you could call xxx person. Would you like me to give you their number?’	<input type="checkbox"/>
6	“That’s not my responsibility”	Focus on who can help the customer and make positive suggestions first before explaining what you are not able to do, using words to show your goal is to help and that do not imply you are avoiding responsibility.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	“I think that should be OK” or “We might be able to do that” or “I don’t think we can do that, but I will find out”	Find out first exactly what is possible to avoid raising false hope and to avoid causing doubt. It is a service to customers to be clear and say you will check what is or is not possible.	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	“We’ll get back to you sometime next week”	This can be improved with greater specificity by stating who specifically will get back to the customer and when specifically. This avoids any confusion and the need for customers to call or email to chase.	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	“Thank you for bringing this to my attention,” “Thank you for your patience” or “I apologise for any inconvenience”	All of these stock phrases can be improved and made more sophisticated or personal to the customer to demonstrate care in our service delivery, for example, “I am so pleased you have told me about this...”, “I appreciate you waiting...” and “I am sorry this has had such an impact on you”.	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	“I’ll have to check that” or “I’ll need to ask someone”	Both of these phrases and their emphasis can be softened so that the customer does not feel that they are being an inconvenience or making the service-giver work harder, especially if the customer’s emotions are already heightened. For example, “I’ll be happy to check this for you right now”.	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you’re hearing any of the above (or similar) responses from your customer service teams, you have the opportunity to help them develop more advanced customer service skills and be able to differentiate your service through the more positive, solution-oriented, empathetic communication they have with customers.

The solution, here, is to re-focus every team member’s mindset through soundly-based customer service training to clearly communicate that we sincerely welcome every opportunity to take ownership and responsibility for the customers’ issues, and to demonstrate that we are resolutely solution-focused and optimistic that we can help the other person from the outset. Having the right skills and resources to confidently and consistently accomplish this will encourage a positive flow and set the scene for significant improvements in our service delivery, even when dealing with complex situations or complaints.

To find out more about how we can help you to achieve your goals for successful, long-lasting training through our Mindset, Language & Action Training and Toolkit, or to book a chat with us, you can:

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