**Course Description**

**BALD, OST 1384, Introduction to Customer Service, 3 credits**  
*(Florida Community College at Jackson)*

This course is an introduction to the basics of customer service technology. Emphasis is on enhancing customer relation skills, building support with customers and improving communication and negotiating skills. Students will learn how to respond to customer requirements and to efficiently handle difficult situations.

**Topics Covered:**
- Introduction to Customer Service Technology
- Developing a Professional Image
- Building Support with Customer
- Customer Relation Skills
- External Customers
  - What they want and how to give it to them
  - Prevent disaster
- Internal Customers
- Training
- Motivation and Commitment

**BALD, MKT 2420, Customer Service II**  
*(Pellissippi State Technical Community College)*

A practical course designed to prepare employees and managers to the customers' expectations. There will be a thorough review of customer service philosophy and the techniques of customer service analysis.

**Topics Covered:**
- What is Customer Service?
- Contributing to the Service Culture
- Encouraging Customer Service Loyalty
- Problem Solving
- Handling Difficult Customer Encounters
- Service Recovery
- Empowering the Employee to Make Decisions

**Essay**

After graduating from high school in 1999, my sole interest laid in the field of psychology. I attended Metropolitan State College of Denver for three years in pursuit of my goal to become a psychologist—that all
changed at the end of my junior year. My mother, who worked as a hair stylist throughout my life, decided to open a salon. I witnessed how hard she worked, and never had an interest in following in her footsteps. However, when she took this brilliant yet frightening step in May 2003, I wanted to be involved.

I began my career as the front desk manager, which was essentially a glorified receptionist. (Company name) was a franchise that began in Fort Lauderdale Florida in 2000, and started going national in 2002. My mom and I had the first location to open in Colorado. In the following essay, I will describe my professional journey at (Company name), and I will focus on the key to our success, which above all is customer service. I will define customer service by our business standards; I will provide specific examples of how we treat customer service as a niche, while describing its overall salience to the success and longevity of our organization.

As part of our franchisee training, we spent two weeks at a corporate seminar to train salon owners on the (Company name) business model. I was merely 21 at this point in time, and had absolutely no experience in any aspect of business management and development. I grew-up in a salon, but the depth of my knowledge never penetrated
beyond the surface. This two-week training was overwhelming and exhausting, but also incredibly enlightening. This was my first experience with terms such as profit and loss, gross revenue, cost of goods, and most importantly client and employee retention. Obviously, I was familiar with the term “customer service” but it wasn’t until then that I truly understood its importance. I left Florida with a new understanding, while also knowing I had an enormous amount to learn.

As the Front Desk Manager, the most important aspect of my job, in addition to hiring and training receptionists, was to maintain focus on customer service. Corporate representatives explained the front desk personnel were the first and last impression for every customer. We were given standards on how to greet clients over the phone and when they entered the establishment, and we were encouraged to find creative ways to give each client a little something extra; perhaps walking around the counter to give them their purchased goods or opening the door for them to exit. We attempted to provide our clients with premier service; however, we still had to work within corporate constraints. We had additional ideas, but each salon had to conduct business according to the exact same
model; we had the same policies and procedures, which corporate diligently oversaw.

After a year of managing the desk, and going to school part time, our Operations Analyst from corporate made a suggestion for me to take over the salon entirely. My mother was a true stylist at heart and wouldn’t give up servicing her own clients, which didn’t allow her time to properly run the salon operations. Therefore, at the age of 22, I became the Salon Manager of (Company name) overseeing a staff of 12, of whom 90% were actually younger than myself. Unfortunately, my career at (Company name) took precedence over my career at Metropolitan State College, but I knew first-hand experience had the potential to be just as beneficial as learning in a classroom.

During my time as salon manager, I worked extremely hard with my staff on increasing sales, and helping them achieve their monetary and professional goals. I accomplished this with different marketing initiatives to build our client base, and industry techniques such as up selling and retailing. I also worked closely with the corporate accountant to get our cost of goods and payroll within margin to ensure profitability based on the revenue we generated. By the age of 24 I proudly gained the knowledge to successfully operate a business, or so I
assumed. We still struggled with a seemingly never-ending battle of employee retention, and subsequently client retention.

We spent thousands of dollars on marketing and advertising, as well as recruitment efforts. We hired stylists, trained them, built their clientele with approximately 150 new clients per month, and simply watched it walk out the door several times a year. We estimated that we lost more than $80,000 within one year as a result of failed employee and client retention. As a leader within the organization, not only was the business affected, I took the losses extremely personal. I knew the only way we could truly be successful was to stop allowing our profits to walk out the door; therefore, I needed to reevaluate not only my leadership and management methods, but also our services; In December 2005, I was presented with my opportunity to do just that.

The (Company name) franchise went bankrupt with an astronomical 16 million dollars in debt; perhaps disconcerting at the time, but the largest blessing in disguise our business could have been given. Each franchisee had the opportunity to buyout their agreements for an additional $30,000.00 from the investment company that took ownership of (Company name) assets. Luckily, we
had the monetary resources to purchase our agreement, and take sole ownership of our salon—making us beautifully independent. And what we lost in corporate support, we made up for with extensive financial savings (franchise fees, marketing and design fees, etc.) and the freedom to conduct our business according to our own knowledge and expertise, which for me had grown tremendously over the past few years.

Following this enormous change, I was presented with an opportunity to work as a consultant for a struggling (Company name) in Las Vegas, Nevada. In addition to my work for that salon, I was also given an opportunity to write for several magazine publications, contributing articles centered on health, beauty, and fitness. After my short stint in the City of Lights, I returned to Colorado to once again take the reins of our family business. Faced with declining revenues and poor client retention, I decided the salon needed to embark on a series of necessary changes, and I finally had the freedom to do it my way. Several thoughts came immediately to mind: update our technology and appearance, re-brand, and re-vamp every aspect of our customer service practices.

In terms of customer service, we first had to determine what customer service meant in the health and
beauty industry. We had to put ourselves in our clients' shoes, and ask what we would want from our stylists and from an establishment to which we were paying approximately $50-$250 per hour. Through the course of many salon meetings and brainstorming sessions, we realized customer service is an element of business that has steadily declined, unless you’re willing to pay for it, of course. Boutiques and high-end retailers such as Neiman Marcus and Nordstrom provide higher quality service for higher quality goods. Fine dining restaurants offer premier service that compliments their premier food and pricing. However, those few examples of top quality customer service stand-alone. We determined that customer service is a niche market, and if we could find ways to fill that niche, we would not only stand out among our heavy competition, but we would retain our clients, and, therefore, maintain and increase our incoming revenue.

Customer service is essentially ensuring customer satisfaction, but we wanted to go beyond that. I had attended salon management training from Salon Training International, and the educator explained that, “Customer service begins when you exceed their expectations.” Seems simple, but it’s not. It doesn’t begin on the phone or when customers walk through the door (as corporate previously
prescribed.) By my trainer’s description, customer service wasn’t even significant until customers were flabbergasted and borderline overwhelmed. It was this mode of thought that channeled us in a direction toward creating a complete customer experience. We had to fill the niche by offering an experience, and not just a product, that none of our competition could emulate.

From this point, the process was effortless. My mother and I shared the same idea on the staff’s involvement throughout the decision-making process; they understand the industry better than anyone, they understand their client’s needs, but most importantly we wanted them to take ownership. Unfortunately, high employee turnover within the beauty industry is as frustrating for clients as it is for salon owners and managers. Therefore, we worked hard to redefine how we treat our employees in hope that would give the customer consistent service personnel whom are well acquainted with their profile and their needs. We no longer wanted clients to go through constant transitions between stylists; unable to build strong relationships with their individual stylist out of fear their stylist will be gone when they call to schedule their next appointment. Hence, our staff helped define and determine what customer service needed to be within our salon; they helped write
our mission statement, and they carried it out through invested action.

We implemented a series of practices: greeting clients immediately upon entry with a handshake, and offering a tour if they were new to the salon. We began offering an assortment of beverages including wine, gourmet teas, coffee, juice, and lemonade; suggested immediately upon entering. We created a RELAX room for our clients to enjoy satellite television and wireless Internet during processing and waiting times. We also began providing free paraffin hand treatments with each service that in a typical salon carries a $15 value. Additionally, we incorporated 10-minute head massages and complimentary blow-dries with each service as well. We even had salon training on properly wrapping a towel around a client’s head following a shampoo to prevent dripping in route to the stylist’s chair. We tried to cover every detail imaginable to create an unparalleled customer experience.

Our final strategy we put in place was making an effort to call clients by name to help create a more personal, trusting relationship. Patrons in the famous television show, “Cheers”, wanted to go where everyone knew their name; we wanted to adhere to the same logic. We also started to maintain an extensive client profile card that
contains information such as what drinks they like and the magazines they prefer to read, as well as personal tidbits discussed during each visit that enables our stylist’s to better serve them.

Correspondingly, we wanted to find a way to express our appreciation to our clients, and create a loyal relationship with each and every one of them; therefore, we decided to implement a number of practices we felt would accomplish that task. We started making customer satisfaction calls two days after their service was complete. The calls, conducted by our receptionist or myself, provided an opportunity for the client to express their thoughts regarding their visit. Many clients who leave dissatisfied will never communicate that unless given a comfortable forum to do so. The calls also provided us with the opportunity to make improvements that we would have otherwise overlooked. Additionally, we created thank you post cards that each stylist sends to their new clients following their first visit to our salon, and we invite them back to receive 20% off their next visit; also a marketing strategy, but it doubles as a sign of our gratitude. Finally, we initiated a client loyalty program done through our website and email. Our loyal clients can sign-up for a program called xPerks, which allows them to
receive monthly emails providing special discounts, promotions, and at times free gifts. Our loyalty program allows us to show our appreciation to clients who continuously support our organization, and it provides a method to maintain consistent communication with each of them.

In correlation, the final and perhaps one of the most important changes we made in our customer service practices were the methods we used to handle difficult customer encounters and complaints. It is common knowledge within the service industry that if you make a customer happy, they’ll tell between two and three people; if you make a customer unhappy without a positive resolution, they’ll tell between eight and ten people. A small, and newly independent business really can’t afford the possibility of losing one client and ten potential clients; therefore, it is essential to try to resolve a negative situation to satisfy the customer. Corporate policies and procedures didn’t allow us to deal with these negative and unavoidable situations the way we would have liked.

Ergo, we made customer service part of our company mission statement, which explains that it is not the opinion of the stylist that matters, rather that of the clients. If a client is unhappy for any reason, we will do
whatever it takes to make sure their needs are met. We do not offer refunds, but we guarantee our work, and will re-do the service until we have achieved the result they seek. We make sure our clients understand this policy during their initial consultation to ensure they are comfortable and know that they should never fear discussing results they are unsatisfied with. At this juncture, we encourage our stylists to make decisions about the proper course of action; they know their clients better than anyone in the salon. Additionally, our new customer service practices incorporated providing our employees with the necessary skills to problem solve and work autonomously rather than umbilical to myself or another superior. Each member of our team has the ability and the tools to handle customer inquiries and complaints consistently and effectively.

Unfortunately, there are times our methods for dealing with complaints are unsuccessful; in this circumstance, we work diligently to remain even-keeled and respectful. I will typically assist the stylist, and speak with the client directly to determine what actions we need to take to ultimately make them happy. Most often, a client just wants a business to understand why they’re unhappy, and make an effort to mend the situation using good communication practices. I follow the customer’s lead and
talk with them in a medium they’re comfortable with. Sometimes face-to-face confrontation is scary; if they choose to call, I make sure to have an appropriate amount of time to discuss every element of their dissatisfaction. As of late, emails tend to be a popular form of communication that eliminates the fear of face-to-face engagement. It is extremely seldom that we can’t diffuse a negative situation. In fact, complaints open a door of communication that allows us to get to know clients on a more personal level, and when handled appropriately they create a loyal and respectful relationship between them and the business as a whole.

Overall, our new and improved customer service standards and requirements have had an incredible impact on our bottom line. We have seen a steady increase in client retention; our average has lingered between 80% and 85%, which is extremely high compared to the industry average. As a result, our revenue has increased and so have the checks of each stylist employed at our salon. Monetary gain isn’t the only factor that contributes to employee retention, but it definitely helps. Ergo, retaining clients enables us to retain stylists, and retaining stylists enables us to retain clients; the circle is complete.
Customer service is the most important aspect of running a successful business regardless of what industry you’re in. However, for a salon that is combating stiff and overly saturated competition, as well as a struggling economy, customer service is the keystone; our business would absolutely fail without it. To this day we continue to brainstorm for new ideas to proliferate our service even more. We never want to grow complacent or to take a client for granted. They choose to come to our salon, they choose to spend hard-earned money here, and we must always choose to show our constant appreciation.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expanded Resume</td>
<td>Updated and detailed personal resume.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client Retention Report</td>
<td>Our company total sheet that indicates the percentage of request and returning clients; the combined percentage displays our salon retention monthly, then quarterly. Also a comparison of the previous year first quarter, which shows a 9.1% increase in retention, and $24,264.79 increase in revenue.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Customer Service as Defined by company</td>
<td>A copy of our mission statement we use as a guide for all of our customer service standards and practices in the salon.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Client Testimonials</td>
<td>A full list of endorsements from devoted clients at company.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promotional and Marketing Items Used for Client Loyalty Initiatives</td>
<td>Monthly xPerks promotions sent to our clients who are part of our loyalty program, as well as thank you cards sent to all new clients as a sign of our gratitude.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Company Website</td>
<td>Our salon Internet site that I created, which contains our client loyalty sign-up as well as client testimonials and staff quotes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Email Example of a Difficult Client Encounter</td>
<td>An email message exchanged between an unhappy client and our salon, which provides an example of how our organization deals with customer complaints.</td>
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