

# 3 TIPS FOR IMPROVING YOUR ONLINE CUSTOMER SERVICE SKILLS

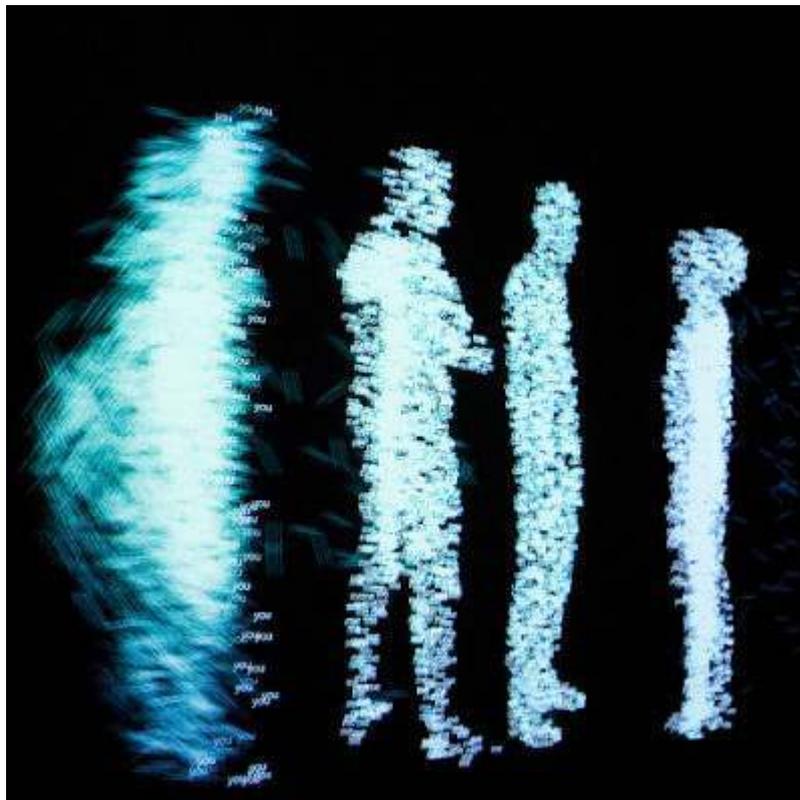
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These days you can do pretty much anything online. From **meeting a potential spouse** (let the record state that I sourced my significant other pre the Internet-dating era), making a restaurant booking, banking or finding a holiday destination - there isn't much that you can't accomplish in cyber space. I live in a house with 7 other people (yes, it is practically a commune) but we have house meetings via email because we all have jobs and lives that prevent us from often being in the same place at the same time.

For people like me, this is great. Resolving conflict and running my life online feels efficient. I only talk to people when I have to, and I am able to proverbially '**think before I speak**' (which, believe me, comes in handy). But when it comes to work, if the choice is between picking up the phone, and sending an email, I will **choose the former** every time.



*Virtual communication is no substitute for a real introduction.*  
(Image via Flickr, Kate Andrews (under CC))

As convenient as it is to be able to engage with people online, there are some serious disadvantages - the most important of which is the **declining emphasis on client service**. While it may be fine to send my housemates a one line email ('Clean the kitchen before I get home... or else!') this is not an appropriate level of engagement for business associates. And often the balance is a **tough one** to strike.

Being someone who loves online communication as much as I do, I have mused about this a lot, and out of my musings, I have derived a broad **three step system** to improving your online client service skills, which ultimately will help you to improve customer loyalty and provide more opportunities for upselling.

1. **If you are liaising with someone that you have never met, pick up the phone**

There's nothing wrong with an introductory email to let a client know that you would like to chat to them. That said, the value of picking up the phone to talk to someone should not be underestimated and one should try this **channel of communication** very early on in a professional relationship. Few people (of course, there are some nut jobs out there) would marry someone whose voice they'd never heard, so why would anyone sign any other contract under these circumstances? If you can't meet face-to-face (often an unrealistic expectation in such a globalised business world) **talking to an audience** is the next best thing. It gives your client a way to visualise the person that they are doing business with and it adds personal value and provides a sense of having a tangible relationship that is lacking in strictly virtual interactions.

**Even better** than a phone call is a video conference call (Skype has this functionality) but if talking to real people isn't your thing, maybe take baby steps.

2. **Remember that tone is harder to comprehend on paper**

When you're interacting face-to-face with someone, it is easy to interpret their tone because you have additional signals like facial expression to make it easy. If you have an EQ of more than 5, you won't find this too challenging on the telephone either. On paper, this is slightly more difficult and in business interactions, it is often all too easy to **misinterpret tone**. The key reason for this is that written words are harsher than spoken ones. For this reason alone (spelling and grammar aside) it is important that you **read every email or client service interaction a few times** before you send it. This will help you to moderate your tone and ensure that nothing you have said could be perceived as rude, confrontational or accusatory. Another good strategy to prevent this is to **exaggerate courtesy** when you are writing an email or an IM. Unless your associate reads the email aloud, this will not seem unusual, and it will go a long way toward making your written tone easier to interpret as it is meant.

3. **Make yourself available**

Too often, individuals in the online service industry tend **hide behind their virtual curtains** and use the lack of immediacy in communication channels as an excuse to delay responding to or contacting their client. If a client called, and you were unavailable, you wouldn't (I hope!) wait days to contact them back. Emails should be viewed in the same light. For clients to feel that they are being listened to, that their needs are being met and that they can trust their contact person within your company, they need to know that their questions, concerns, compliments or complaints will **be dealt with quickly and efficiently**. Neglecting this area, will make them feel like they are dealing with a machine and not with a person, and it will **damage good relationships** that you have built in the past.

There is **a lot more to online client service** than is covered here. Other important qualities to display in your client interactions include empathy, patience and good netiquette. However, bearing the above points in mind will go a long way towards ensuring that your clients don't feel cheated or dissatisfied by the channels through which you manage them.