



**THE ROLE OF SECURITY IN  
PROVIDING CUSTOMER SERVICE**

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Whether supervising a security department or working as an officer it is important to understand that the only reason a company is in business is because of the customers that the company serves. Customer Service is a Service that is provided to customers by the employees and security officers of a business. The security force must be made up of individuals who are capable of not only protecting the assets of the company, but also being sales representatives who come to work with the understanding that they are representing the company through their actions and appearance (Thibodeau, Hertig & Barnett, 2003). In order to do this, several measures and steps must be taken to ensure that customers are receiving the best service possible from the security officers that are protecting the facility, the employees and the customers who are shopping or using the services provided by the company.

## HIRING PROCESS/ SELECTION

The reputation of a security department is put on the line every time a customer has contact with one of the officers (Cicerone & Anderson, 1997). For this reason it is necessary to screen out any applicant who may destroy the reputation of a security force before actually hiring them. The earliest stage at which the process of hiring quality officers who are going to promote exceptional customer service is job posting. Attractively posting available positions in the security department will likely attract a group of people who are more serious about the work they will be doing rather than getting applications from people who look at the security field and categorize the people working in it as rent-a-cops.

The interview for a position with a security department is very important. The interview is an opportunity for both the applicant and the company to see what they are getting themselves into. During an interview prospective officers need to be clearly told what kind of environment they will be working in (Gulinello, 2004). As a security department looking for officers that are going to improve the quality of the existing department, it will be important to ask specific questions such as “what would you do in this situation” or “explain how you’ve handled difficult confrontations in the past” (Rice, 1999). Having the applicant explain how they would resolve certain problems using customer service skills would be a great idea (Rice, 1999). A psychological profile of prospective officers should be done as part of the screening process to determine the employee’s attitudes toward different situations that may arrive such as employee theft or how they will handle policy violations by customers or other employees (Guilnello, 2004). The employer should identify what skills the potential employee possesses during an interview (Javitch, n.d.). Specific questions aimed at accomplishing this goal should be asked so that the employer can measure the candidate’s skill in a certain area (Javitch, n.d.). The interviewing process should consist of multiple interviews. During this time a complete background check should be done so that an employer can see what kind of person they will be employing when hiring a security officer and decide whether or not the individual will be 1), a good fit for the existing department and 2), will promote a positive image of the security department along with the officers already employed. An employer needs to really know the candidate before hiring them (Javitch, n.d.). It is important to remember that the individuals who are chosen to work for a business are going to be representing that business. The hiring process should be done with this in mind because the reputation of not only the new security officer is at risk, but the reputation of the entire department and company is as well.

## **TRAINING**

Good security departments train their officers in security related specialties, but exceptional security services provide their officers with instruction that allows them to affectively communicate with customers and provide the services that they want (Alexandre,1997). During the training period a security officer is going to be taught to do a variety of tasks, but one of the most important skills they need to have a grasp on is how to provide customers with service (Rice, 1999). According to Cicerone and Anderson (1997) officers are more capable of meeting the expectations of customers if they are properly trained. Customers expect things to be done a certain way and before a security officer can be hired and trained it is the responsibility of managers and supervisors to know what customers want so that officers can be trained in a way that produces positive results when dealing with customers. This is an important point of linkage between the security department and the marketing function in the organization. Customer profiles should be shared with security officers in some manner consistent with the organizational structure and culture. In this way there is a better chance of having officers interact with customers in a positive manner in every instance: training and procedures may miss a customer relations area of concern but an officer educated on customer needs and desires is most likely to arrive at a positive interaction.

After the training and probationary period, a security officer should know what is expected of him or her from the company and the customers. When dealing with unhappy customers it is important for the officer to remember to try and put themselves in the shoes of the customer and think: what would I want if the roles were reversed (Rice, 1999)?

In recent studies, security personnel were asked questions relating to customer service to determine whether or not customer service was a part of their job that they considered important (Alexandre, 1997). Security teams then made suggestions to improve customer service such:

- Acknowledging customers as they enter the security officer's area or post.
- Training officers to assess customer's reactions.
- Training officers to communicate with customers clearly to avoid confusion.

Although these things may seem basic, they are sometimes overlooked. Having officers trained and socialized in these processes can help in getting customers to think that security is an approachable entity, and that they are there to serve customers; not just 'catch the bad guys.'

## **PHYSICAL APPEARANCE**

"You many never have a second chance to make a first impression" is a common saying. Physical appearance is one of the most important aspects of customer service. In most cases people will see an officer before they hear them. Regardless of how well they speak or how good they are at solving a crisis, if they do not look professional the opinion a customer may have of an officer will greatly diminish because of the way they look. "Dress for success" is an old saying that is still sound advice for security officers.

Uniforms are important because they allow the customer to identify an officer. Managers and security supervisors should select uniforms that will allow officers to dress for the assignment

they are given (Zalud, 2004). The uniformed officer is an asset to the overall loss prevention program of a business (Benny, 1999). There are different opinions on what type of uniforms should be worn by officers who work in a place where they are in contact with customers. Military style uniforms show employees and customers that security is an entity that is to be taken seriously. This type of dress can also serve as a crime deterrent (Zalud, 2004). On the other hand, casual dress by security officers may be preferred because of the amount of interaction between officers and customers (Zalud, 2004). Regardless of the type of uniform utilized by a security department, identification should be worn by an officer at all times unless they are working undercover (Benny, 1999).

The way officers present themselves is very important because they are representing management and the company. According to Rice (1999) officers should be neat. This means:

- Shirt tucked in and pressed.
- Shoes tied and polished.
- Hair well groomed.
- Clean shaven.
- Duty belt and equipment positioned correctly.
- All equipment is working and located in the proper place.

Officers must be clean. This means clean and pressed clothing, hands washed and fingernails trimmed and clean. Jewelry should be kept to a minimum (a watch should always be worn), only light makeup and not a lot of cologne or perfume. Officers should follow the saying “less is more.”

The equipment worn by officers can be just as important as what they wear. When conducting patrols officers need to be prepared for a variety of different situations (Vail, 2003). The communications equipment issued to officers can be vital to their safety therefore must be maintained and always in proper working order (Benny, 1999). Other equipment that every officer must carry are:

- Pens. More than one pen should be carried in case one is loaned to someone or one doesn't work.
- Notepad. A notepad needs to be used in order to write field notes. In the security field notes should be an accurate method of what an officer observed, did and heard (Fawcett, 2003). The written word is an important “tool of the trade,” reports of events can be utilized by others who did not witness what happened (Fawcett, 2003).
- Flashlight. A flashlight is important in case of power outages or if an officer can't see very well in a certain dark area that they are assigned to patrol. A flashlight can also serve as a sort of magnifying glass for closely examining locks, windows and other parts of the environment for signs of tampering. Tampering could indicate an intrusion attempt or the planting of a destructive device.

## **COMPLAINING CUSTOMERS**

Good customer service by employees and security officers will often prevent customer dissatisfaction from occurring, but complaints can not always be avoided. It is important to remember to treat all complaining customers with respect (Thibodeau, Hertig & Barnett, 2003).

Getting into an argument will not help in resolving the situation, and in all likelihood it will escalate the problem. The complaining customer should never be embarrassed by the officer. Security officers need to place themselves in the place of the complaining customer and try to understand where they are coming from. Building the ego of a complaining customer will calm them and probably stop the situation from becoming worse than it is already. Officers should thank the customer for bringing a problem to their attention. At the same time officers should not be afraid to confront misstatements made by complaining customers (Garner, 2003). Listening and trying to understand where the customer is coming from as well as providing solutions for the customer will usually be enough to impede a complaint from turning into a hostile situation (Thibodeau, Hertig & Barnett 2003).

## **HOSTILE CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT**

According to Anderson (2001) customers are more demanding and potentially more dangerous than ever before. It is not easy to define hostility because there is a thin line between rude behavior and hostility by a customer directed towards employees or other customers. Security officers must understand that obnoxious behavior, a complaint or being upset with an employee is classified as rude behavior, but when an employee is threatened verbally or physically, hostility begins (Anderson, 2001). It is not always possible to stop a customer from becoming hostile; therefore it is beneficial to train security officers to handle these stressful conditions by implementing some type of hostility management program. A hostility management program should focus on key areas that will provide the officer with the training that they need to combat dangerous situations and still maintain a professional customer service image.

- Officers must first be capable of identifying hostile customers.
- An officer must be trained and know what their responsibilities are when dealing with a hostile customer.
- Officers must understand what caused the customer to become hostile.
- Officers need to be able to quickly defuse a hostile situation by coming up with a solution or removing hostile customers from the premises in order to preserve the safety of the officer, employees and other customers.
- Preventative measures should be put into place by management, supervisors and officers to prevent hostile situations from occurring.

The basic primary goal of every officer is to protect themselves from being injured (Stroberger, 2003). Defensive tactics training may be necessary to detain a hostile customer so that they do not injure an officer, employee or customer. One of the most important aspects of defensive tactics is avoiding unnecessary conflicts (Stroberger, 2003). Communication is the most important aspect of defensive tactics. If it is possible to defuse a hostile situation without utilizing force it should be done. Hostile people can have a tendency to become violent and in these situations it is the responsibility of an officer to protect innocent people from becoming injured including themselves. Defensive tactics is the tactical, legal and socially acceptable handling of violent persons (Hertig, 1998). Any force used against a person must be seen as reasonable and necessary. Force against a person should only be used to prevent harm or injury and to control a situation (Hertig, 1998). Defensive tactics should be covered in training and the officer may wish to train in other forms of self defense in order to provide protection. Defensive

tactics and customer relations should complement each other so that hostile, aggressive and potentially violent persons are best managed.

Records should be kept of violent situations (Anderson, 2001). Keeping proper records of incidents will ultimately help security officers avoid violent situations. Report writing is a very important aspect of a security officer's duty. Report writing is something that should be taught and emphasized throughout training. Professionally written reports will help the employer if legal problems arise. These records should include the date, time locations and why the confrontation occurred (Anderson, 2001).

## **SAFETY**

In a recent survey of a large customer base in the United States, female shoppers were asked why they shop at one place compared to the other. The number one reason was safety (Mesenbrink, 2000). If a customer does not feel safe in the store in which they are shopping they will shop somewhere else. In order to make customers feel safe, security should be seen as approachable and always present.

A surveillance system is helpful in catching shoplifters and employees who are stealing, but at the same time it can also promote customers confidence which will make the customer want to come back. Surveillance systems should be visible (Mesenbrink, 2000). Customers should know that they are being watched, not only to stop them from stealing, but also to make them feel safe. Crime deterrence should be integrated with customer relations whenever possible. Visible surveillance systems are one way of doing this.

## **TELEPHONE STANDARDS FOR PROTECTION OFFICERS**

Security officers may be required to handle phone calls if they are working at a customer service window or at a reception desk. Establishing telephone standards for protection officers is important because the goal of an employer is to provide service to customers who are at the store/business or in contact with them. There are procedures and steps that can be taken to ensure that a customer is treated with the service that the company wants customers to be provided with. According to Rice (1999) when answering the phone officers should:

- Greet the customer with respect. For example; "Thank you for calling \_\_\_\_\_. This is officer \_\_\_\_\_. How may I help you?"
- Be timely and alert.
- Use a friendly greeting.
- Always ask for the customer's name.
- Talk slowly and distinctly
- Be helpful.

If an officer must place a customer on hold they should:

- Ask the caller if they mind being placed on hold.
- Thank the caller for holding

- Let the customer know that they have not been forgotten if they are on hold for an extended period of time.

Finally when ending a call an officer should always say thank you and end the call with a positive statement. “Thank you for calling. If I may be of further assistance please let me know.” This is a great way for protection officers to end a telephone conversation.

## **RESPECT FOR THE INDIVIDUAL/CUSTOMER**

When communicating with a customer a protection officer should conform to the Golden Rule of customer service which means treat the customer the way that you would want to be treated if the roles were reversed (Garner, 2003). Customers are vital to a company because without them there would be no business. The customer does not want to shop in a place where they are treated unfairly or are not respected and there is always another store that is eager to accept their business. Many of the customers who security personnel come in contact with are people who have a problem and are searching for a solution (Garner, 2003). For this reason it is the responsibility of the officer to treat the customer with respect while attempting to come up with a solution to their problem.

When speaking to a customer it is important that the officer be positive so that the customer believes that the officer is actually doing everything they can to help the situation (Rice, 1999). It is very important to listen to customers and understand where they are coming from and to show the customer that you are listening to them. There are four different aspects of listening and understanding that an officer should become familiar with. According to Rice (1999) they are:

- Body Language
  - Keep direct eye contact
  - Use open body language with no folded arms, no crossed legs and keep hands out of pockets
  - Always try to smile unless the situation does not call for it
- Voice
  - Use a calm voice
  - Keep even tones and volume without cracking or raising the voice
- Wording
  - Do not use negative words such as “no,” “I can’t” or “but”
- Self Confidence
  - This is the most important aspect of communicating with a customer.
  - Keeping a positive, confident attitude will help to find a solution to the problem.

Being a good listener is very important when communicating even if the officer does not agree with or like what the customer is telling them (Garner, 2003). Angry people can be the most difficult customers to handle because something has made them mad obviously and they see it as the officers duty to fix the problem for them. When listening to a customer the protection officer should concentrate on what is being said so they can understand where the customer is coming from (Rice, 1999). During a conversation an officer must treat the customer with respect. This

means not interrupting, not looking away, not putting words in the customer's mouth and not answering questions with questions (Rice, 1999).

## **SUPERVISOR RESPONSIBILITIES IN IMPROVING CUSTOMER SERVICE**

According to Hertig (2004) the definition of supervision is the act of supervising or overseeing. Supervision is generally at the line level and is performed by personnel at the first level of supervisor such as sergeant or shift supervisor. Supervisory duties include (Hertig, 2004):

- Overseeing patrols.
- Responding to incidents.
- Investigating incidents.
- Maintaining discipline.
- Enforcing rules and regulations.
- Scheduling and assigning personnel.

It is the security supervisor's responsibility to establish and maintain a customer service friendly image of the security department and the business (Hertig, 1999). Supervisors are a liaison between management and the security officers. They communicate the objectives of management to the line officers. It is the responsibility of the security supervisor to create policies that officers must and will want to follow that will help improve customer service in the company. In order to do this a supervisor must (Hertig, 2004):

- Hire the best people.
- Not allow officers who are doing more harm than good to advance in the profession.
- Properly communicate the department's and business's mission to the officers.
- Conduct thorough investigations not only in the hiring process, but of employees and the business itself.
- Respond promptly and decisively when needed.

Training is also the responsibility of security supervisors. Training should be done in a way that will promote customer service. To do this, supervisors need to ensure that officers are:

- Trained in security procedures and practices.
- Trained in how to handle customers.

The security industry is often guilty of downgrading personnel (Hertig, 2004). Supervisors should encourage officers to advance themselves and get involved in earning professional certifications; doing this will encourage officers to stay with the employer. A high turnover rate is bad for customer service because customers may see this and see that there is something wrong with the company. Retaining good employees who practice a high level of customer service will over time improve the customer service of the company.

## **ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING CUSTOMER SERVICE**

There are many recommendations that can be made to improve customer service by security officers. One way of improving customer service is the surrogate shopper approach. Surrogate

shoppers are employees from an investigative company that pose as a customer and see how the security officers of a company react and treat customers without supervision (Muuss, 1995). Using this service shows management and supervisors the areas that the security officers need to improve in. It also allows management and security supervisors to see which employees need to be trained again, let go or rewarded for the way that they handle customers and do their job (Muuss, 1995).

Clearly defining what expectations a company has of its security department will allow the officers to perform their duties in the proper way (Cicerone & Anderson, 1997). Listening to employees' recommendations may also provide the company with useful techniques and ideas that can increase the level of customer service the company provides for its customers. Wal-Mart has a policy to listen to their employees because they may be their best idea generators.

Officers should be informed about customer satisfaction (Cicerone & Anderson, 1997). Informing officers if customers are satisfied or not satisfied allows the officers to improve on what they are doing or keep on doing what they are doing.

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