

Elite Educational Institute

Customer Service Standards & Guidelines



We care.



About this Guide

Elite Educational Institute's culture and image are dependent upon each and every one of our Instructors, Administrative Assistants, and Branch Directors. It's our people that make our company great!

Elite's goal is to promote excellence both in the classroom and in the way we treat the people we serve. We want to be renowned not only for offering quality educational services but also for providing a truly phenomenal customer experience.

These guidelines are intended to give everyone in the Elite family permission and encouragement to go above and beyond: to not only satisfy but delight our customers and our colleagues!

"Here is a simple but powerful rule: always give people more than what they expect to get." – Nelson Boswell

Table of Contents

ABOUT CUSTOMER SERVICE	5
What is customer service?	5
What's in it for me?	6
Do I provide great customer service?	7
VALUES AND PRINCIPLES	8
ELITE SERVICE CREDO	9
GENERAL STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES.....	10
Appearance and Dress Code.....	10
Attentiveness.....	10
General Verbiage (Zero-Star & Five-Star Phrases).....	11
Addressing Parents	12
Addressing Students	13
The Six Forbidden Phrases	14
Helping a customer who is experiencing a language barrier.....	16
When you don't have the answer.....	16
Writing everything down	17
Follow up, follow up, follow up.....	17
Be nice.....	17
PHONE CALLS.....	19
Answering phone calls	17
Responding to voicemail and messages	20
Screening calls.....	20
Transferring a call	21
Dealing with telemarketers.....	21
Phone etiquette: DOs & DON'Ts	22

EMAIL.....	23
Replying to emails	23
Email vs. Phone.....	23
Grammar, spelling and punctuation.....	23
Tone	24
Email Examples.....	24
FACE TO FACE	26
Assisting walk-in customers.....	26
When a customer is waiting	26
Dealing with multiple tasks at once.....	27
ASSISTING DISSATISFIED CUSTOMERS.....	28
The customer is not always right.....	28
Helping customers who are upset or angry	29
Dealing with disrespectful students	30
Dealing with abusive behavior	31
SPECIFIC SITUATIONS.....	32
Administering diagnostic tests.....	32
Answering “silly” questions.....	32
Accepting Payments	33

ABOUT CUSTOMER SERVICE

What is customer service?

Customer service is defined by the Business Dictionary as *“all interactions between a customer and a product provider at the time of sale, and thereafter. Customer service adds value to a product and builds enduring relationship.”*

What is great customer service?

Great customer service is treating all customers – parents and students – with a friendly, helpful attitude and going *above and beyond* the call of duty to create *extraordinary* experiences. Rather than just satisfying customers’ basic expectations, truly great service creates *raving fans* who will go tell everyone they know about what an amazing experience they had at Elite!

In addition, at an educational services company like Elite, excellent customer service means having a thorough knowledge of Elite's programs and services as well as the college preparation process *and* being able to help customers make the best choices for them.

Who is responsible for great customer service?

Because all Elite employees – Branch Directors and administrative staff as well as instructors – are representatives of the company, we should all demonstrate great customer service skills.

Why is customer service so important?

Customers have many options when it comes to test preparation and after-school tutoring centers. If customers don’t feel that their business is appreciated by Elite, they can and will choose to spend their money elsewhere. Poor customer service reflects badly on the individual employee who is providing it and on the company that the employee represents.

Exceptional customer service, on the other hand, results in a feeling of satisfaction for both the customer and the person providing the service! At Elite, we provide great service not just because it gets customers to keep coming back, but because it’s the right thing to do.

It is far more expensive to acquire a new customer than it is to retain an existing one.

Do I provide great customer service?

When assisting customers, consider these questions:

- How do you expect to be treated as a customer?
- When have you experienced poor customer service? What was bad about it?
- When have you experienced exceptional customer service? What made it great?
- How does providing excellent customer service make you feel?
- What should the total experience feel like when customers come to you?

Then ask yourself, *“Do I provide great customer service?”*

“One of the deep secrets of life is that all that is really worth doing is what we do for others.” – Lewis Carroll

VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

Elite consistently strives to make a positive difference in the lives of those we serve. We do this by putting into practice the five pillars of our service philosophy.

Pride

Elite is widely regarded as one of the finest test prep and college consulting companies in the world. Since 1987 we have developed the most effective curriculum in the business, assembled an expert staff of administrators and instructors, and helped thousands of students achieve their academic goals. We're proud to be the best, and our pride shines through every interaction we have with our customers and co-workers.

Passion

Elite employees are passionate and enthusiastic about our skills and the quality of our work. We take real pleasure in assisting our students and their families in an upbeat, energetic and genuine way.

Patience

Problems aren't always easy to solve, and customers usually understand this, but occasionally a misunderstanding or miscommunication can cause a customer's patience to run thin. When a glitch arises, we listen carefully so that we can fully understand the issue and work to resolve it as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

Persistence

When a challenge lands in our lap, we take responsibility for it and *own the issue* until it's resolved. This doesn't mean we have an answer ready for every problem at all times; it means that we work with our teammates to come up with an appropriate solution and remain persistent until the job is done and our customer is satisfied.

Professionalism

We expertly operate a world-class company and exhibit courtesy, graciousness, and a professional demeanor in everything we do.

ELITE SERVICE CREDO

The staff of Elite Educational Institute exhibits genuine care for our students, whose education is our highest priority.

We seek to provide only the highest quality curriculum and services to encourage and inspire our students at every opportunity.

GENERAL STANDARDS & GUIDELINES

Appearance

- ***While at Elite, staff members should always be well-groomed with professional, neat, and well-maintained attire.***

Great service means representing the company in the way we look as well as they way we treat our customers. A professional appearance projects a positive image for Elite. Our dress code lets our students and parents know that we're on duty and ready to serve, and helps them easily identify who we are and tell our staff from our students. Dress codes vary slightly by branch, so be sure to ask your Branch Director if you have any questions about acceptable workplace attire.

Elite Dress Code

- *Employees are expected to present a neat appearance and are not permitted to wear ripped or disheveled clothing.*
- *Garments worn by any Elite employee should cover the body to avoid distasteful or suggestive exposure of skin and undergarments.*
- *Body piercing and body art in the form of tattoos and other skin pigment alterations should not be visible while on duty.*
- *Hair, including facial hair, should be clean and neatly trimmed and conform to professional standards of style and color.*

Attentiveness

- ***Be attentive, pleasant, and professional in person and on the phone.***
- ***Avoid eating food, chewing gum, using cell phones, grooming, applying makeup, and attending to personal business while customers are present.***
- ***Avoid excessive personal chatting with other staff members while customers are present.***
- ***Anticipate your customer's needs and questions.***

All customers appreciate it when they are attended to courteously and promptly! Always greet customers with a smile as soon as they walk in the door. Don't wait for the customer to initiate

the conversation. If you are in the middle of an activity or assisting someone else, acknowledge the waiting customer and let the customer know that you will be with him or her shortly.

Remember that when customers are present, they are your priority. Eating, using cell phones, or chatting with coworkers while customers are near can give the impression that we're ignoring them or are not ready to help.

General verbiage

- ***Staff members should be extremely well-spoken, polite, and clear, always speaking to customers in a positive and courteous manner.***

Always use basic courtesies like *"please"* and *"thank you"* when interacting with customers and co-workers. In written and spoken communication with customers, be as articulate as possible and avoid overly casual speech or phrases that could be interpreted as impolite.

Of course, you should always consider the person you're speaking with. If you refer to a ninth-grader as *"ma'am,"* you'll probably get some funny looks. Students will usually feel more comfortable with casual speech, while parents will appreciate a more formal tone.

Here are some common negative phrases to avoid and their positive replacements:

ZERO-STAR PHRASES

"..."
"Hey!"
"What's the problem?"
"Yeah / Yep / Okay"
"No problem."
"Huh?"
"Is that all? / Anything else?"
"We can't do that."
"Calm down."
"I don't understand you."
"Like I told you before..."
"We're so busy right now."

FIVE-STAR PHRASES

"Good morning/afternoon!"
"Excuse me, sir/ma'am."
"How can I help you?"
"Yes / Of course / Definitely / Absolutely"
"You're welcome."
"Pardon me?"
"Is there anything else I can assist you with?"
"What I can do is . . . "
"I can see that you're upset. . . ."
"Could you repeat that, please?"
"As I stated previously..."
"What can we do for you?"

Addressing parents

- *Greet all parents with a smile.*
- *Use a parent's name effectively, but discreetly, three times during every significant interaction.*

Elite serves many customers, so can be easy for a student or parent to feel like just “a number,” especially during our busy summer term. Becoming familiar with our students and their families and using their names as often as possible is a powerful signal of recognition and appreciation.

Whenever possible, personalize your interaction with students and parents by using their names. A parent or student who approaches the front desk with a question and is greeted with a blank stare or a deadpan “Hi,” will feel dismissed and unappreciated. While there may be many students enrolled in our programs, **we want to make every student and parent feel that he or she is the most important person at our office.** A parent or student who is greeted with a smile and an enthusiastic “Good morning, Ms. Quinn!” or “Hi, Jennifer!” will feel like a valued member of the Elite family and remember that positive interaction in the future.

The easy method is to use a parent's name at the beginning and end of each conversation (e.g. “Good afternoon, Ms. Quinn” and “Is there anything else I can help you with, Ms. Quinn?”). Then, just find a spot in the middle of your interaction to use their name a third time (e.g. “Well, we have a few different scheduling options for SAT prep, Ms. Quinn.”).

Of course, it's not always possible to memorize the names of all our students' parents. When in doubt, or when meeting them for the first time, refer to parents as “Sir” or “Ma'am.”

If the customer doesn't offer it, here are a few nice ways to ask for their name:

- *“Could I ask for your name?”*
- *“I'm sorry, I don't believe I've asked for your name.”*
- *“Whom am I speaking with?”*
- *“Would you mind spelling your last name for me?”*

Addressing students

- ***Maintain a warm and friendly attitude of respect toward all students, addressing them by their first names whenever possible.***
- ***Avoid any foul language during interactions with students.***

It's important to remember that even though it is typically the parents who make the decisions and write the checks, our students are our customers, too. We want every student to feel welcome and have a great experience at Elite. Doing our best to learn all our students' names and use their names as often as possible lets students know that they are part of the Elite family.

Our students spend a lot of time with us, and they are expected to work very hard while they're here, just as they are at school. However, Elite differs from public school in two important ways: Students are here voluntarily, and they (or their families) are paying to be here.

Because of this, we have to strike a delicate balance and provide students with both the discipline and the level of comfort they need to succeed. So, while it may be necessary at times to use a firm tone with students, it is never acceptable to speak down to students or treat them with disrespect. At Elite, we maintain a disciplined learning environment within a culture of warmth and respect.

"A person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language." – Dale Carnegie

The Six Forbidden Phrases

- **Take extra care to avoid these five negative phrases, and use their positive alternatives instead.**

Negative: “I don’t know.”

When you say “I don’t know,” what a customer hears is “I don’t care.” If you don’t have an immediate answer to a customer’s question, that’s okay! Let them know that you’ll gather the information and get back to them with an answer as soon as possible.

Positive: “That’s a great question. Let me find out for you!”

Sometimes finding information for a customer will be as simple as walking to your Branch Director’s office and asking. Other times, it may take a bit more research. In all cases, ensure good communication with the customer about the status of their request. And most importantly, if you’ve arranged to call back a customer with an answer, *always get back to them as promised!*

Negative: “I can’t . . .”

There is no real value in saying that something can’t be done. It frustrates the customer and makes you seem powerless.

Positive: “I wish . . .” & “What we can do is . . .”

Rather than focusing on your inability to fulfill a request, empathize with your customers and let them know they’re right by saying “I wish . . .” Example: “*I wish there were an available spot for Jessica in our afternoon boot camp. Unfortunately, that particular session filled up some time ago.*” If a request or service must be denied, always give alternatives and immediately follow up with what you CAN do for the customer.

Negative: “Hang on a second.”

Most customers’ #1 frustration is being put on hold or told to wait, and the phrase above only makes things worse. Telling a customer to wait is rude and dishonest: nothing takes *only* a second, and time moves very slowly while on hold.

Positive: “May I place you on hold while I find that information?”

Instead of making a command, use these three steps when you need a little extra time before giving an answer:

- **Ask** if the customer is able to hold.
- **Estimate** the actual time that may be needed. It’s easier for people to be patient when they know what to expect. If you expect that it will be more than a minute or two, ask the customer if they would prefer to be called back when you have an answer.
- **Wait** for their response.

Negative: “You’ll have to . . .”

When it comes to customers, we don’t demand; we request. “*You’ll have to*” sounds like an order. The customer doesn’t *have* to do anything. It’s our job to work for them!

Positive: “You’ll need to . . .” or “Could you . . .”

Try these more courteous and friendly-sounding alternatives. Example: “*You’ll need to stop by to take a diagnostic test before classes start. Is there a time this week that would be convenient for you?*”

Negative: Starting a sentence with “No”

“No” at the start of a sentence immediately rejects customers and co-workers.

Positive: Any phrase that doesn’t start with “No”

Instead of going negative, follow these three steps:

- **Pause.**
- **Think.**
- **Suggest** what you *do* have or what you *can* do.

Negative: “We’re so busy right now.”

Even if it’s true, telling customers that you’re busy gives customers the impression that they’re imposing on us and makes it seem that we don’t have the time to serve them. The customer is concerned with our ability to help him get what he wants, not with how busy we are.

Positive: “I’d be happy to help you with that!”

Rather than focusing on your busy-ness, stay positive and let your customer know that you’re here to help! If you’re already assisting someone else or if something is keeping you from assisting the customer immediately, let waiting customers know that you’ll help them or get back to them with an answer as soon as you’re able.

Helping a customer who is experiencing a language barrier

- **Remain patient and courteous.**
- **Speak slowly and clearly, using short sentences.**
- **Don't speak louder.**
- **Ask short clarifying questions that can be answered with a yes or a no.**

One of the biggest challenges in customer service involves assisting a customer who has trouble understanding how you talk or who is difficult to understand. There's no easy solution to a language barrier. The best solution is to connect the customer with someone who speaks his or her language, but that's not always possible or practical.

The most important aspect of dealing with a language barrier is patience. Try to break down the conversation into short sentences and questions. A person struggling to understand another language has a lot to think about. It helps if he or she has to think about only one thing at a time. Briefly summarize the conversation as you proceed, checking in to verify that you're on the same page.

Phrases that work:

- **Avoid phrases** like *"I can't understand you,"* and *"I don't understand what you're saying."*
- **Use phrases** like *"I'm not sure I know how to help. Do you want to enroll your son in a class at Elite? Okay, good. Is your son in high school?"*

When you don't have the answer

- **Don't give inaccurate information.**
- **Let the customer know that you don't have an answer at the moment, but make a commitment to find out, either by researching and getting back to the customer or referring him or her to someone who will know.**

While it's necessary to have a solid knowledge of all of Elite's programs and policies, it is nearly impossible to have an answer to every single question a customer may ask. While it can be tempting to "fake it" out of embarrassment and give a customer incomplete or inaccurate information, it's much more effective to be honest and let customers know that you don't have the information right now but will find out and follow up with them.

Writing everything down

- ***Keep track of all requests and responsibilities on your daily task sheet***
- ***Review your task sheet at the end of the day to be sure everything is complete.***

When things get busy, your task sheet is your best friend.

Imagine yourself in this situation: a parent is at your desk asking about class schedules while another waits in line behind him, a student approaches you with a quiz Scantron that isn't scored properly, the phone is ringing, and the alarm goes off to let you know it's time to tell a classroom full of students to start the next section of their practice test. You could try to deal with everything as quickly as possible and keep all the requests and responsibilities in your head, but chances are something will get forgotten in the shuffle. Instead, turn to your trusty pen and paper.

Getting into the habit of jotting down every request, no matter how small, on your daily task sheet will ensure that nothing gets overlooked. Your task sheet will allow you to prioritize and check tasks off as they're completed. At the end of your shift, you can review your sheet and pass any unfinished tasks on to the person working the next shift.

Follow up, follow up, follow up!

- ***When a customer requests information or assistance, take ownership of the task and see it through to completion.***

In most cases you will be able to respond to an inquiry with a quick answer or some simple information. If you cannot answer a question or deliver a service immediately, ask the customer if it would be okay for you to get back to them with an answer. Be sure to give them an estimate of how long it will take. Ensure good communication with the customer about the status of their request, and *always get back to them as promised.*

Be nice!

- ***Smile.***
- ***Treat your customers the way you would like to be treated.***
- ***Exhibit a genuine sense of interest and concern for your customers' satisfaction.***

Elite's service standards are meant to encourage us all to do one basic thing: BE NICE. That's the core of great customer service!

Setting a tone of respect and kindness will encourage the same behavior your co-workers, their students, and their parents.

When you're having a great day, be nice. When you're having a not-so-great day, be nice. When a new student enrolls, when a parent is upset, when everything's under control, or when things get stressful? Be nice. Most of all, if you're ever having a hard time remembering a particular customer service standard or procedure and you're not sure what to do, just be nice, and you can't go wrong.

“Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless.” – Mother Teresa

PHONE CALLS

Answering phone calls

- **Answer with a “smile,” using the following greeting:**
“Thank you for calling Elite! This is [First Name]. How can I help you?”
- **Answer phone calls within three rings.**
- **Don’t answer without identifying yourself (e.g. “Hello” or “Hello, Elite.”)**
- **Don’t wait for someone else to answer the phone when you’re available.**
- **Be attentive, pleasant, and professional in all phone communication.**
- **Don’t keep a caller on hold for longer than 60 seconds without offering a call back.**

A warm and sincere greeting is one of the foundations of great customer service. Your voice will be most customers’ very first impression of Elite!

Starting off all conversations by thanking the caller for contacting us immediately shows the customers that they are important and that we’re grateful for their business. Offering your name adds a personal touch and prevents confusion; the customer can call you by name and knows who to call if he needs any help in the future. Asking how we can help the customer lets him know that the specific reason we’re here is to assist him.

All that goodness in three short phrases!

During busy times, it may not always be easy to answer the phone within three rings. Still, customers expect us to be available during our posted hours of operation, and consistently answering the phone on the fifth or sixth ring or letting calls roll to voicemail can send the message that we are too busy to handle our customers’ business.

If the phone rings while you’re assisting a customer in person, assess the situation. Would it be rude to ask the customer in front of you to wait? If you feel that the customer would not be inconvenienced, politely excuse yourself (*“I’m sorry, Mr. Kim, could you excuse me for one moment?”*) and answer the call. If the call goes on for more than 30 seconds or so, consider offering the caller a call back (*“I’m sorry, Ms. Quinn, I’m actually assisting another customer at the moment. May I offer to call you back in a few minutes?”*).

Responding to voicemail and messages

- ***Respond to all voicemails and messages as soon as possible, and in all cases, within one business day.***

Few things are as frustrating for customers as leaving a voicemail and not receiving a call back. The longer they wait, the more likely it is that they'll take their business elsewhere. Make a point of responding to voicemails promptly. If answering the question or solving the customer's problem will take more than 24 hours, return the call to let the customer know you've received the message and are working on the issue.

Screening calls

- ***Discern the reason for all incoming calls and transfer or take messages as appropriate.***

In addition to students and parents, you will also receive calls from other Elite employees, telemarketers, and even publications or news stations calling to speak with someone about the company. If a caller asks to speak with a director or corporate member, screen the calls before letting the caller know if the person is available:

- *"May I ask who's calling?" and "May I ask what it's regarding?" (Avoid the impolite alternative, "What is it about?")*
- Take note, then call or intercom the appropriate person if it seems to be a legitimate call. Try not to forward telemarketing calls to the directors.
- If an Elite director or employee is calling, you don't need to ask them what their call is regarding; simply transfer the call.
- Give corporate related messages to your Branch Director or Assistant Director, and they will deliver the message to the appropriate people.

"Quality is never an accident; it is always the result of intelligent effort." – John Ruskin

Transferring a call

1. **Explain why** – If necessary, let the caller know why you need to transfer the call. *“That’s a question our Branch Director, Mr. Cho, would be happy to help you with.”*
2. **Ask permission** – This will give the caller an opportunity to ask any additional questions. *“May I place you on a brief hold while I connect you?”*
3. **Introduce the caller** – Wait for an answer and explain the reason for the transferred call. This will give the other person a chance to prepare for the call and save the caller from having to explain the situation all over again. *“Mr. Cho, I have Mr. Williams on the line. He has some questions about his daughter’s scores.”* (If the person you’re transferring to doesn’t pick up the line, don’t just transfer the caller to voicemail. Instead, return to the caller and explain: *“I’m sorry, Mr. Williams, it seems that Mr. Cho isn’t available at the moment. I’d be happy to take a message or connect you with his voicemail if you would prefer.”*)
4. **Complete the transfer** – When both parties are ready, you can connect the caller.

Dealing with telemarketers

- ***Deal with all callers (telemarketers included) in a professional, courteous, and efficient manner.***

Elite frequently receives calls from salespeople and telemarketers. Rather than directly transferring these calls to directors or to corporate members, take a message *first*. If it is important, your Branch Director will call them back.

Telemarketers are widely disliked, but for the most part they’re people trying to do their jobs like anyone else. While it may be tempting to be rude to a telemarketer who calls during a particularly busy time or who interrupts an interaction you’re having with a customer, keep your interaction polite and efficient. Rudeness is never helpful and always unpleasant for customers and co-workers who may be standing by.

Phrases that work:

- *“Our Branch Director makes those decisions, and she’s not in right now. Could I take your name and phone number?”*
- *“I’m assisting a customer at the moment. Could I take your name and phone number and call you back at a more convenient time?”*

Phone etiquette: DOs & DON'Ts

DO	DON'T
<p>Answer the telephone in a polite and welcoming voice using the following greeting:</p> <p><i>"Thank you for calling Elite. This is [First Name]. How can I help you?"</i></p>	<p>NEVER answer with the greeting "Hello, Elite" or "Hello?"</p> <p>NEVER speak to a caller with an impatient tone of voice.</p> <p>NEVER make a caller feel like he or she has asked a "dumb" question.</p>
<p>Listen carefully to what the caller is saying or asking.</p> <p>Ask for clarification in a polite voice if you do not understand the caller's question or request.</p>	<p>NEVER say <i>"I can't understand you"</i> or <i>"I don't know what you are talking about."</i></p> <p>Many of our customers do not speak English fluently and may not be well informed about the American education system.</p> <p>Try to clarify their requests by asking questions.</p>
<p>Be prepared to explain Elite's program offerings clearly.</p> <p>Understand what distinguishes Elite from other tutoring and test prep companies.</p> <p>Ask the caller if he or she has any questions about our programs.</p>	<p>NEVER speak negatively about Elite's competitors.</p> <p>Instead, highlight the strengths of Elite's programs (e.g. original curriculum, qualified teachers, expert counseling)</p>
<p>If you are unable to answer a caller's questions, politely ask the caller to wait while you seek assistance from the Director or offer to call back with an answer as soon as possible.</p>	<p>NEVER provide college admission information that you are not certain about to a caller.</p> <p>Instead, ask the caller if he or she would like to make an appointment to speak with a Director.</p>

EMAIL

Replying to emails

- ***Reply to customer email inquiries as soon as possible, but in all cases within one business day, with either an answer or a date when you will have an answer.***
- ***Be articulate, knowledgeable, and able to describe the services offered by their branch.***

Customers who correspond with us via email should be assisted in a timely and courteous manner. Remember, *the customer is waiting on you*, and a prompt response makes an excellent first impression! If you need a little extra time to gather information for a customer, don't leave them hanging. Send a reply acknowledging the request to let the customer know that you're working on it and when you'll have more information. And of course, if you make a promise to get back to the customer with a reply, remember to follow up!

Email vs. Phone

- ***Use the form of communication that the customer prefers.***

Some customers prefer to communicate via email, and others like the phone. We're here to make things easy for our customers, so do your best to use the form of communication that they find most convenient. When customers include their phone number in an email, call them back rather than replying to the email and asking them to call us.

Grammar, spelling, and punctuation

- ***Always carefully read through your messages to check for correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation before sending.***

An email that's not written good give people the wrog idea about whoever is sennding it and they might think that its how all the staffs at Elite talks.

Hmm. Let's try that again: A badly written email message reflects poorly on the sender and on Elite. This is doubly true for our company since grammar is a major part of what we teach! Even if you're not an English tutor or SAT Writing instructor, you represent the company. Remember to always proofread your emails before filling in the "To:" field and sending.

Tone

- ***Take extra care to be polite and personable in all email messages, using a formal but comfortable tone.***

It's very easy for written communication to be misinterpreted. What was intended to be a brief response can often be construed by the reader as a curt or rude. Remember to use basic courtesies like "Please" and "Thank you" in every message.

Always use the subject line. Treat emails like a letter: Begin with a salutation, use paragraphs and subheadings if it will help the reader get the message, and close with a professional sign-off. Be concise without being abrupt.

Email Examples

Below are two example replies to an email inquiry. Which reply gives you a better impression of the writer and the company she represents?

Inquiry Email

From: Brian Lee
Subject: Summer SAT Classes

I would like to know the schedules and prices for your SAT summer programs. My daughter is a junior and wants to improve her scores. She already took a practice test at Flex Prep and scored 1650. Please contact me with more information and prices. Thank you.

Reply #1

From: Elite Educational Institute
Subject: RE: Summer SAT Classes

We have 5-days summer Boot camp, 3 days Summer Boot Camp and weeknd classes from 6/20 to Aug 14—WHICH 1 DOES YOUR DAUGHTER WANT TO TAKE? You will have to set up a DT with us before you can register for classes. Call us at (555) 555-5555 Thx.

Take a moment to note a few specific things you would change about Reply #1.

Reply #2

From: Elite Educational Institute
Subject: RE: Summer SAT Classes

Dear Mr. Lee,

Thank you very much for your message! We have summer SAT prep program options to fit a variety of schedules and budgets. Our main programs are:

Summer SAT Boot Camp

Five days per week – Eight-week program is \$2400

SAT Summer Intensive

Three days per week – Eight-week program is \$1400

SAT Weekend Program

Two days per week – Eight-week program is \$1200

You can find our complete, detailed summer class schedule at eliteprep.com/los-angeles. We do ask that all new students take an Elite diagnostic test so that we can accurately measure their improvement and ensure they are placed in the right classes. Please feel free to contact us at your convenience to set up a free diagnostic test and consultation with one of our directors.

If you have any questions or if I may be of any further assistance, please email or call us any time at (555) 555-5555. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Christina Kim
Administrative Assistant

What specific things make Reply #2 a more effective message?

Email phrases that work:

- *“Thank you for your message!”*
- *“If we can be of any further assistance, please contact us any time.”*

FACE TO FACE

Assisting walk-in customers

- ***Smile, make eye contact, and greet every customer upon arrival.***
- ***Maintain an engaging expression and keep focus on the customer during your interaction.***
- ***Be articulate, knowledgeable, and able to describe the services offered by your branch.***

All customers appreciate it when they are attended to courteously and promptly. Always smile and greet customers as soon as they walk in the door. Don't wait for the customer to initiate the conversation.

If you are with another customer or on a business call when a customer walks in, excuse yourself to the person you are currently speaking with, make eye contact with the new customer, smile, and let the customer know that you will be with him or her in a moment.

When a customer is waiting

- ***Acknowledge all customers.***
- ***Keep waiting customers informed.***
- ***If the wait gets too long, provide the customer with alternatives.***

In most cases, the most frustrating part of waiting isn't the delay but the uncertainty. Customers ask themselves, "*When will someone acknowledge that I'm here?*" – "*How long will I need to wait before the Branch Director can see me?*" – "*Why did the Administrative Assistant just leave without telling me why?*" – "*Can I leave and come back later?*"

Rather than keeping them in the dark, make sure your customers have all the information you do. For example, you might tell waiting customers:

"Our Branch Director Mr. Cho had an emergency earlier today that caused a delay of about 30 minutes, so all his appointments have been pushed back. I know that's really frustrating for everyone, including us. If you would prefer not to wait, I would be happy to reschedule your appointment for another day. If you would like to see Mr. Cho today, you don't have to wait here. Just let me know and come back about 30 minutes after your scheduled appointment."

Dealing with multiple tasks at once

- ***Prioritize tasks.***
- ***Write everything down.***
- ***Keep all waiting customers informed.***

Let's return to the hectic situation we imagined previously in the guide: a parent is at your desk asking about class schedules while another waits in line behind him, a student approaches you with a quiz Scantron that isn't scored properly, the phone is ringing, and the alarm goes off to let you know it's time to tell a classroom full of students to start the next section of their practice test.

What do you do?

The good news is that there are many right answers to this question. There's no one particular order that will work every time. The key is to prioritize your tasks, write down anything you'll need to follow up on, and keep all waiting customers courteously informed.

First decide which tasks can wait and which can't. For example, in the situation above, assisting all your customers before attending to the test-takers would likely interfere the timing of the students taking the practice test. Here's one possibility that would work:

1. *Answer the phone and let the customer know you're assisting another guest but would be happy to call back within 15 minutes. (Jot this down on your task sheet.)*
2. *Briefly let the waiting parents know that you have a few rooms of students who need to be told to move on to the next section of their practice test, and that you'll be back to assist the customers in one minute.*
3. *Let the student with the quiz know that it will be rescored and ready to pick up by the end of the day. (Jot this down on your task sheet.)*
4. *Leave the desk and tell the test-takers to switch sections.*
5. *Return to the desk and assist the waiting customers in the order that they arrived.*
6. *Call back the customer who phoned earlier, and enjoy the feeling a job well done!*

Customers are not an interruption to our work. They're the reason for it!

ASSISTING DISSATISFIED CUSTOMERS

The customer is not always right

You've probably heard the old customer service slogan "The customer is always right." The idea behind the phrase – that customers are our priority and that their needs are important – is terrific. Unfortunately, the phrase itself can be misleading.

Clearly the customer is not always right. Sometimes customers make unreasonable requests and have unreasonable expectations. They may not understand the nature of our business and what we can and can't do for them. They may even occasionally bend the truth to get what they want. Practically speaking, it's impossible to give every customer what he or she asks for in every circumstance.

So, can we come up with guidelines that realistically describe how we should treat customers? Here are a couple phrases that we think work well:

- *The customer always deserves to be treated as if he is important and his opinions, needs, and wants are worth our attention.*
- *The customer deserves to receive the maximum effort of those serving him, even when his expectations, wants, and needs may be impractical.*

Even in situations when we can't do exactly what the customer asks, we can contribute to the development of the customer's positive impression about how he is treated. Our job is to focus not only on what we provide to the customer, but on how we provide it.

Whether or not you're able to provide exactly what a customer requests, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Customers respect **effort** and will often turn on you if they sense you aren't making an effort to meet their needs.
- Customers expect to have their needs, expectations, feelings, and words **acknowledged and understood**.
- Customers want to feel like they have **choices**. When customers feel helpless or powerless, they're more likely to become frustrated, angry, and aggressive.
- Customers appreciate **positive surprises** – things you do that go beyond their expectations or benefits you offer that are normally unavailable to them. Positive surprises are most useful when dealing with difficult or upset customers.

- Customers appreciate **simplicity and convenience**. Customers who are made to jump through hoops unnecessarily will become overwhelmed and frustrated.
- Most of all, customers need to feel **important**.

Helping customers who are upset or angry

It's easy to be helpful and polite to someone who is being nice to you. It's the customers with a negative attitude who present more of a challenge. Here are some techniques to help you deliver exceptional customer service in such cases:

Listen

One of the best things you can do when faced with a difficult customer is to listen. Resist the temptation to interrupt with your own point of view. Only by paying close attention to what the customer is telling you can you come up with a solution to the problem. Take notes when talking to difficult customers on the phone. And dissatisfied customer will only get more upset if he or she has to repeat information over and over.

Use calming and focusing techniques

Keeping your tone of voice even and neutral can compel someone who is yelling to lower his or her own voice. Find points of agreement, use empathy statements, ask pertinent questions, and assure the customer that you'll do everything you can to solve the problem.

Keep it positive

If a customer approaches you with an arrogant, aggressive, or defensive attitude, stay calm, objective, and focused on your mutual goal of finding a resolution to their problem. Responding angrily is never helpful and always makes the situation worse. Instead, ask what you can do to rectify the situation. Once you have a better idea of what the customer wants, you can identify and offer solutions.

Don't take anything personally

Your willingness to give others the benefit of the doubt and to overlook bad behavior gives the other person the opportunity to correct their own attitude.

Assume the best

Sometimes, a customer's or co-worker's statements or actions can be interpreted in more than one way. If you ever have the fleeting thought "*What does he/she mean by that?*" make the decision to take the comment in the best way, and use clarifying questions to confirm. Even if the customer actually meant the comment to be aggressive or negative, he or she will see that you sincerely want to help, and his or her attitude will change.

Never disparage the work of another team member

Even if a customer's dissatisfaction is the result of an oversight by your co-workers, criticizing them in front of a customer only makes it seem as if you're making excuses and frustrates the customer, who doesn't really care whose fault it is. Instead, own the problem and focus on solving the issue at hand.

Thank the customer

Complaints can be golden opportunities to show customers how much you care! Thank the customer for pointing out the issue as a way for us to make our service better.

Be fair

Treat every customer with the same level of courtesy and respect. Don't play favorites.

Dealing with disrespectful students

- *Don't take anything personally.*
- *Never react out of anger.*
- *Use a firm tone when necessary, always remaining calm and objective.*
- *Be exceedingly respectful in all interactions.*

Some student customers may be rightfully dissatisfied with some part of their experience at Elite and approach you with a reasonable concern or complaint. Other students may simply demonstrate inappropriate and disrespectful behavior because they are showing off for friends, having trouble at home, or any number of other reasons.

Our mission at Elite is to maintain a disciplined learning environment within a culture of warmth and respect. To do this, we have to strike a delicate balance and provide students with both the discipline and the level of comfort they need to succeed.

When a student displays disrespectful behavior, it's natural to want to show the student who is boss by scolding, lecturing, or reacting with sarcasm. But as tempting as they may be, such responses will cause resentment and encourage even more disrespectful behavior from your students.

Instead of reacting impulsively to disrespectful behavior, simply rely on Elite's rules. Before enrolling, each student must sign a Student Contract, which clearly details what is expected of our students and the results of breaking the contract. If a student violates the contract, there is no need to become upset or scold the student. Just follow the process outlined in the contract and enforce the appropriate consequence, whether it is a zero on a homework assignment, a demerit, or a letter home to parents. And of course, always inform your Branch Director or Assistant Director of any disrespectful behavior.

Dealing with abusive behavior

You are never expected to endure verbal abuse or profanity. If a customer is verbally abusive or profane, maintain your composure and set limits by explaining that you want to help, but that the conversation must continue in a respectful manner or it must end.

Phrases that work:

- *“Sir, I understand that you’re upset, but if you continue to yell and swear, I’ll have to end the conversation.”*
- *“I’ll certainly try to help you with this, but before we continue I’ll need your promise that you won’t yell or swear at me. Okay?”*

Seek first to understand. Then be understood. – Chinese Proverb

SPECIFIC SITUATIONS

Administering diagnostic tests

Part of our jobs is assisting students who have come to take practice tests to help determine their starting scores and which classes are best for them. A student's diagnostic test appointment will often be his or her first time in an Elite office, and you will be the first impression a student gets of the Elite staff! Take extra care to be kind, courteous, and helpful during this potentially stressful time for students and parents.

When a student arrives to take a diagnostic test, follow these steps:

- Upon the student's arrival, smile and introduce yourself before asking for the student's name.
- Remind the student to take the test to the best of his ability since it will help to determine class placement and how long he should study at Elite.
- If the student is timing himself, remind him that it is essential to stay within the time limits. (Doing otherwise can be considered cheating.)
- Make sure the student is ready before telling him to begin.
- Give clear instructions regarding what to do after the test is over.
- If the student will be joining a room full of students who are already testing, explain the testing procedures outside of the room so that you do not disturb the other test takers.
- Coming to Elite for the first time can be intimidating. Rather than just telling students which room to go to, always walk students to the room where they will be testing, and ask if they have any questions before beginning the test.

Answering “silly” questions

Always display patience and understanding when assisting both student and parents, keeping in mind the age differences and cultural differences of our customers.

As you become more familiar with Elite's programs and policies, answers that seem obvious to you may be less obvious to them. Remember that junior high and high school students haven't had all the experiences you have, and that not all of our customers have a firm understanding of the complex system of American higher education. Even fewer of them know all the ins and outs of how Elite classes and programs work!

If a student forgets his or her ID number or homework packet, instead of showing annoyance, try a gentle reminder. Empathy and kindness go a long way toward our goal of encouraging and inspiring our students at every opportunity.

Accepting payments

It's important to keep in mind that our customers are making a significant investment when they utilize Elite's services.

Always be kind and gracious when accepting payment or contacting a customer about a payment that is due. Take the opportunity to sincerely thank customers who are submitting payments, and let them know that we truly value their business.

"Your customers don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. – Damon Richards
