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A brief guide to common words to eliminate,
common phrases to watch out for, and topic areas to
avoid in customer service.

IT ALL STARTS WITH COMMUNICATION

Communication is the cornerstone of all great customer service. The words we choose and use have an impact on our customer and their relationship with us and our organizations.

Opportunities to improve the language we use with customers are all around us—from our signage to our voice messages to the voice prompts on our telephone system—but in this guide, we're going to stay focused on the language we use directly with customers in one-to-one communication.

The lists below cover common words and phrases that I *still* see people using when working directly with customers.

It also includes a list of sensitive topics that you should avoid or be very careful with in a professional setting.

If you've had customer service training before, some of these may seem obvious; yet, no matter what your experience level, you'll certainly find some food for thought.

Make sure to check out the end of this section for advice on how to use this guide with your teams!



COMMON WORDS TO ELIMINATE OR MINIMIZE

Words, even in isolation, can have an impact on the listener and the speaker. Here is a list of words you should try to eliminate or minimize.

No. Did you know that just seeing the word “no” flashed for less than a second can **prompt the release of dozens of stress hormones in the brain**? Once you pay attention to it, you’ll realize how much we all use this word. Eliminate it as much as possible.

- **REPLACE:** “No. I don’t have that ___.”
- **WITH:** “I have a few ___ I can offer you, that just isn’t one of them.”



Don’t/Can’t/Won’t. These negative terms are various degrees of bad, depending on the context; however, they are very challenging to avoid completely. Just understand that they are not optimal and to try to find other ways to express these concepts.

- **REPLACE:** “I can’t do that.”
- **WITH:** “The only options I have available are __ and __.”



But. The challenge with but phrases is that we know what comes after the but—bad news. Think about a phrase you hear all of the time in customer service, “I’m sorry, but...”. Is what comes next ever something you want to hear? **You don’t have to eliminate “but” from your vocabulary; you simply have to use a technique called reverse the but.** If you can’t avoid a negative statement (the customer keeps pushing for instance), then put the bad news up front.

- **REPLACE:** “I’d love to, but we’re not allowed to do that.”
- **WITH:** “That is not a service we offer, but I’d love to help you explore a few other options.”

Unfortunately. Like but, this word sends a signal; it sets up an immediate expectation that what comes next is not going to be to our liking. This is also a challenging word to eliminate, because it is, at its core, a word that nice people use. It’s a way of saying *I wish I didn’t have to say or do this, but I do*. It’s not a terrible word, but it is **a trigger word that prompts defensiveness.**

- **REPLACE:** “Unfortunately, I’m unable to do that without approval from our Accounts Receivable department.”
- **WITH:** “I’ll have to check with our Accounts Receivable department, but they usually get back with me immediately.”

Complaints

Complaint. There are simply better words to use when acknowledging a customer's comments. Many people know better than to use this word with a customer, but I still hear it once in a while.

- **REPLACE:** "I'm going to send your complaint to our Tier 1 Team."
- **WITH:** "I'm going to make sure our Tier 1 Team receives your feedback to see if they can fix these bugs."

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE WITH YOUR TEAM

We provided this guide to give you a tool you could put to use immediately! You are licensed to use it internally with your team. Like any tool, it is only as effective as the manner in which you use it. Here are a few tips for maximizing its impact.

- **Share in parts.** It is best to focus on one to three ideas at a time. If you are sending out tip emails, just use one idea with your comments could work. If you're doing a mini-training or huddle, use a few.
- **Make it relevant.** A crucial aspect of delivering training that sticks is making it relevant to the learner. Take the example language (REPLACE/TRY THIS) and adapt it to your normal service situations.
- **Make it fun.** Try to spice up the content. Include an appropriate meme. If training, give people the original phrase and have them try to improve it.

COMMON PHRASES TO WATCH OUT FOR

Some phrases that people use with customers are ineffective; others are simply inappropriate. Below are some common phrases I still hear customer-facing professionals use and some language you can try instead.

It's our policy. You generally want to avoid using *policy* or *rules* with a customer. There are some very narrow exceptions to that concept; however, in general, **saying "it's our policy" or a similar phrase to a customer is one of the cardinal sins of customer service.**

- **TRY THIS:** Use the reason, the WHY, behind the policy (if you have one). "I know it might seem like a small thing, but we actually do this for your safety and the safety of our other customers."

It's not my department (or job). The customer really doesn't care whose job it is, and **whenever they hear this phrase, they know that the buck is being passed.** You should never use this phrase to let customers know you can't help them; however, *you CAN use this phrase to let customers know you're going the extra mile for them.*

- **TRY THIS:** "I am happy to help you with this; however, I want to let you know that I'll need to bring in Department X to get this fully resolved."
- **TRY THIS ALSO:** "Usually, our customer accounts specialist handles these, but I know you're in a rush, so I am going to take care of this for you."



It's not my/our fault. Even if this is true, the customer doesn't want to hear it. This phrase is used all too often as an endpoint—as in, it's not our fault, so we're not responsible. Now, it *is* okay to mention things that are outside of your control, as long as you do not use them to escape responsibility.


- **TRY THIS:** “Well ma’am, it looks like the entire Internet went down in your area this morning. I know Federal Power and Light are working on getting the grid back up; here’s the plan we have to make sure your website is back online immediately after power is restored.”



You're the first one to complain about this.

This is bad for two reasons—one, it uses the word complain, and two, it singles out the customer in a negative way.

- **TRY THIS:** “Thank you so much for letting us know. This is my first time with this particular issue. Would you mind if I did a little research so I can make sure I figure out the best way to resolve this for you?”



Please hold. Okay, you *can* say this; you just can't say **ONLY** this. Want to talk about how to start an experience off on the wrong foot, have the customer hear *please hold*, a click, and then hold music. No matter how rushed you are; a few words more are always possible. Of course, it's best if you can ask if they mind waiting on hold and allow them to answer; however, if you are unable to do so, you can at least soften the language.

- **TRY THIS:** "Thank you for calling ACME. Do you mind if I place you on a brief hold?"
- **TRY THIS ALSO:** (if no time to wait for a response) "Thank you for calling ACME. I'll be right with you after a brief hold. I appreciate your understanding."
- **PS.** Asking someone to hold and not waiting for the response because you are concerned they will trap you in a conversation should be avoided whenever possible. In many cases, you might be better off letting some people go to voicemail and giving better service to the ones you handle. Only you can judge that based on the situation and your company's practices. Just remember, if they do leave a message, call them back promptly!

Calm down. Don't say this to a customer. Ever.

- **TRY THIS:** If a customer is in a state where you feel you need to say this, use language like this to pivot the conversation. "*I truly want to help you; do you mind if I ask you a question?*"

There's no way that happened. This phrase is the same as calling the customer a liar or delusional. Of course, it's possible the customer is one or both of those things, but we certainly don't want to say it.

- **TRY THIS:** "Wow, I've never even heard of that happening before. Do you mind if I ask you a little more about it. I want to make sure that we get this resolved for you and that it doesn't happen to any other customers."



I'd like to. This phrase is perfectly acceptable, in moderation. Just don't overuse it, or your customer might start to cringe. When you say it a lot, you're focusing too much on what YOU would like as opposed to what the customer needs.

- **TRY THIS:** "If you don't mind, I can escalate this to our Priority Support Team."



My hands are tied (there's nothing I can do). The customer already feels trapped; you're the person who is supposed to help them escape the trap. Sometimes, you really don't have much you can do for the customer, and this phrase tends to come out when you know the conversation is going nowhere. However, even when you reach that point, it's still important to pivot to what you or they CAN do.

- **TRY THIS:** "Though I understand why you are asking for this; I can only offer the options I mentioned a few minutes ago. I am more than happy to help you explore those."

I wish we didn't have this policy. It is tempting to want to undermine a policy the customer doesn't like, as it puts you on the customer's side and gives you a pass on having to refuse what the customer wants. That said, the cons of using this type of phrase outweigh the pros. First, you're undercutting your organization, and second, if you're using this phrase, that means you've already allowed the conversation to focus on the policy and not the available options.

- **TRY THIS:** "I understand how this policy can be frustrating in your specific situation. Let's see what we can do to ___."



TOPIC AREAS TO AVOID OR TO BROACH CAREFULLY

Every industry, every organization, and every customer/client relationship are different.

If you're working a retail checkout desk (cash wrap), you will generally want to avoid any of the topic areas below. If you have a deep client relationship spanning many years, then you may cross some of the lines below; you just want to do so carefully.

- **Politics/Religion/Sex.** This is the trifecta of topics to avoid. As societies across the world have gotten even more polarized in recent years, this idea is more true now than ever before.
- **Personal life.** This one is the most context sensitive. With deeper client relationships, you will naturally talk about personal matters, though it's important to know where the line is in each situation. For example, I once had a medical professional ask me if I had any siblings. Okay, that qualifies as small talk. The next question she asked was, "Are you close with them?" Can you say, *inappropriate?*
- **Complaining about your job or company.** It doesn't matter how close you are with your customers; complaining about your job or company reflects poorly on you and the organization you represent.
- **Coarse language or cursing.** While the societal line on certain words has moved a lot in the past few decades (at least in the U.S.), you simply never know who you're engaging with or where their line is. As a rule, you should avoid anything that could be characterized as a curse word.
- **Humor.** Humor is one of the best ways to bond with someone and establish rapport; it is also a great way to risk offending someone and, if not ruining the relationship, lowering their opinion of you. Be careful with humor and jokes, even in closer relationships.



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WE APPRECIATE YOU!

The material in this guide is taken from one of the learning aides in our Rapid Hero virtual training course: Employee Onboarding II. We hope you enjoyed it!

To learn more about our customer service training and our Rapid Hero series, [click here](#). We look forward to hearing from you!



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