



8. Gender-sensitive customer service

Do you know how gender impacts the customer service experience? Have you analysed customer feedback to identify any patterns related to gender-specific (lack of) satisfaction with your service? What measures do you use to ensure appropriate treatment of customers' complaints in a gender-sensitive fashion?



What do we mean by gender-sensitive customer service?

Gender-sensitive customer service refers to providing service in a manner that is mindful of the differences in how customers of different genders can both experience your product/service, and express their needs or (dis)satisfaction about it. It involves adopting policies and practices which ensure that after-sales customer interactions are conducted in a way that avoids gender stereotypes or undue assumptions linked to the gender of the customer, and are respectful of the preferences of each gender. Gender-sensitive customer service also entails ensuring that feedback and complaints are handled by a diverse team, who reflects and is able to relate to the customer population it serves. Ultimately, these efforts lead to an enhanced overall customer experience across the board.

Why does gender-insensitive customer service happen?

In a 2021 survey of close to 3k global CEOs, customer experience was identified as one of their very top management priorities [1]. However, when discussing improvement areas, many executives overlooked a critical factor: the impact of gender bias on customer-employee interactions. However, when discussing improvement areas, many executives overlooked a critical factor: the impact of gender bias on customer-employee interactions. Gender bias in customer service arises from a mix of societal stereotypes, cultural norms, and entrenched perceptions of gender roles. As a result, employees may unconsciously interact with customers differently based on these expectations. For instance, research shows that both men and women salespeople tend to respond more positively to male customers [2] and often approach them more quickly than women shoppers [3]. This could be due to associating men with authority or purchasing power, leading employees to prioritize male customers to align with perceived expectations of buying intent. Moreover, some male customer service staff may be less inclined to duly process a claim submitted by a woman customer, if they assume that women are more emotional and hence “difficult to deal with”. A similar bias exists in healthcare, where studies have shown that women’s pain is often downplayed by doctors. For example, women with acute abdominal pain are up to 25% less likely to be prescribed powerful painkillers than male patients [4]. Additionally, women wait an average of 65 minutes before receiving treatment for abdominal pain, compared to just 49 minutes for men, despite experiencing the same symptoms [5]. This discrepancy is thought to stem from gender biases, leading doctors to perceive women as being “dramatic” about their pain. Another stereotype may lead to assuming that women are less knowledgeable about technical matters than men. For instance, research shows that, in industries like car mechanics, women often receive higher quotes for repairs than men [6]. An imbalance in the gender composition of a service team can also amplify these biases. For example, a predominantly male team might unconsciously favor male customers or be more dismissive of concerns brought forward by women customers. Addressing these biases is particularly challenging because they are subtle and often ingrained in everyday interactions. Traditional customer service metrics, such as satisfaction scores or transaction times, rarely capture these nuanced behaviours, and employees may not even be aware of their own biases. Additionally, since biased behaviour can manifest in non-obvious ways, such as tone of voice, body language, or how attentively a customer is served, managers may find it difficult to identify and correct them. Consequently, these biases often go unnoticed and unaddressed, perpetuating unequal treatment in customer service.

Why is gender-sensitive customer service important?

Gender-inclusive customer service is essential to foster strong customer relationships and satisfaction, and therefore ensure long-term business sustainability. Exceptional service acts as a competitive differentiator in crowded marketplaces, drives positive word-of-mouth and minimizes the negative one. For instance, the Ritz-Carlton empowers its employees to spend

[1] <https://www.ibm.com/thought-leadership/institute-business-value/report/ceo>

[2] <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1989-34891-001>

[3] <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1046669X.2013.803426>

[4] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/interactive/2022/women-pain-gender-bias-doctors/>

[5] <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/10/emergency-room-wait-times-sexism/410515/>

[6] <https://www.scholars.northwestern.edu/en/publications/repairing-the-damage-the-effect-of-price-knowledge-and-gender-on->

up to USD2k to resolve guest issues or enhance their experiences [7]. While this may seem excessive, retaining existing customers is actually five to seven times cheaper than acquiring new ones [8]. While poor service can harm customer retention and a company's reputation, discriminatory customer attention can have even more dire consequences, leading to significant public backlash for companies that appear discriminatory. A 2020 survey revealed that nearly a quarter of respondents had stopped patronizing a company accused of discrimination [9]. Furthermore, discriminatory practices can lead to financial repercussions, as some companies have faced multimillion-dollar settlements for lawsuits related to customer discrimination [10].

How does one implement gender-sensitive customer service?

Making customer service more gender-sensitive requires reviewing and articulating specific requirements for all touchpoints of the customer experience. These include:

- 1. Conduct comprehensive audits:** Conduct regular audits tailored to your specific industry and customer lifecycle, mapping all employee-customer touchpoints such as call centres, in-store experiences, or online chats. Identify potential areas for bias by assessing interactions through mystery shoppers or varied customer inquiries. Clearly define measurable behaviours to evaluate the appropriateness of responses, focusing on aspects like language, tone, body language, and response time to ensure a thorough understanding of service quality.
- 2. Ensure diversity among your customer service team and train them accordingly:** A team with varied perspectives can help reduce bias in customer management. Build a diverse (after-sales) service workforce that reflects the customer base. Review training materials to ensure they highlight diverse customer profiles and include guidance on respectfully addressing individuals from different genders and backgrounds. Also, try to implement employee rotation programs to expose staff to various customer demographics, as a way to enhance empathy and understanding.
- 3. Standardize service protocols:** Develop and implement standardized scripts and guidelines for employee interactions. This helps ensure consistency in how customers are treated, reducing the risk of bias in service delivery [11]. Provide specific language for employees to use, especially in sensitive situations, and formalize how perks or discounts are distributed to guarantee fairness.
- 4. Encourage feedback:** Establish channels for feedback from both employees and customers. Create task forces or forums where employees can share their experiences and suggest improvements. Actively engage with customers from diverse backgrounds to gather insights about their service experiences, focusing on any barriers they may face.

[7] <https://hbr.org/2021/11/fighting-bias-on-the-front-lines>

[8] <https://hbr.org/2014/10/the-value-of-keeping-the-right-customers>

[9] <https://www.lendingtree.com/credit-cards/study/boycotting-companies-political-pandemic-reasons/>

[10] <https://hbr.org/2021/11/fighting-bias-on-the-front-lines>

[11] <https://hbr.org/2018/05/how-companies-can-identify-racial-and-gender-bias-in-their-customer-service>

How to measure progress and success?

Through our own, LeFil's [research](#), we identified a number of metrics that can be improved through gender-focused initiatives, and which are meaningful to track as you progress with the implementation of your efforts. For some of these metrics, we provide a benchmark value, which is the average that close to 100 ventures like yours recorded after having worked on this topic. These metrics are:

Metric	Benchmark
Customer/ user/ end beneficiary satisfaction	81%
Proportion of women customers/ users/ end beneficiaries who feel empowered by your product/ service	62%
Annual growth rate in earned revenue	71%
Customer/ user/ end beneficiary turnover rate	N/A
Proportion of staff trained in gender mainstreaming	59%

Case studies



Removing gender bias from customer service by Bee Business Suite

Bee Business Suite increased its revenue by 86% by introducing a customer service manual that incorporates a gender perspective and training its customer service team to become more gender-sensitive.

Bee Business Suite offers an enterprise resource planning (ERP) software for SMEs in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. The software is designed for companies in the commercial sector and includes features like inventory management, quotations and invoicing. Through its accessible, streamlined, and integrated solution, Bee Business Suite helps its clients have access to accurate and fast information, which allows them to make better business decisions.

Bee Business Suite's team took part in our Gender Mainstreaming Workshop and realized that its customer service department had a gender bias. This team, which included 3 male and 1 female staff, showed a noticeable resistance to addressing support requests from female clients, particularly when emotional language was involved. Additionally, the team realized there was a gender bias in the prioritization of customers' complaints, given it was highly dependent on the judgement of the specific customer service staff handling the complaint and entering the information into the company's software. This bias led to inefficiencies in the customer service and missed revenue opportunities, as extra services can be requested and sold through this channel. To improve the gender sensitivity of its customer service team, Bee Business Suite decided to design a customer service manual with a gender perspective, and train its staff on gender-mainstreamed customer service. To do so, Bee Business Suite:

- implemented a diagnostic test to determine the level of gender bias in its team
- developed, implemented, and analyzed a customer and employee satisfaction survey
- delivered gender-mainstreaming training for its customer service team
- designed a customer service manual that incorporated a gender perspective, focused on active and unbiased listening and communication strategies (e.g. use of neutral and non-sexist language, avoidance of presumed gender-based roles, use of the client's preferred pronoun, use of empathic language)
- updated its customer service management software to include a qualitative description of the problem or complaint.

As a result of these activities, Bee Business Suite increased the overall satisfaction of its customer service team by 3%, as employees feel better equipped to deal with customer complaints, regardless of the customer's gender; the team's satisfaction with work-life balance also increased by 25%, as the reduced inefficiencies also reduced their overtime. Throughout this process, the company has been able to maintain its high standards in terms of proportion of claims solved on time (84%) and customer satisfaction (85%). Additionally, its customers have praised the increased efficiency and customized attention of the customer service. Finally, thanks to the reduction of inefficiencies in customer service and the effective sale of extra services through this channel, Bee Business Suite achieved an 86% revenue increase.