

BAKING

The Most Valuable Ingredient



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It is amazing the number of ingredients that are out there. There are thousands of different combinations for different applications. It can make a food developer giddy just thinking about it. Of all of these ingredients, the one that has been the most valuable in my career is the one that seems to be in shortest supply these days. If you can get it, it is generally available at a very low cost, which is amazing in these times of skyrocketing ingredient prices. Using it can save you money and can make you significant amounts of money if properly applied. People are willing to pay extra for your products if they include this ingredient.

It is extremely versatile and is applicable in every development environment.

The drawback is it can be a little tricky to apply if you don't focus on the application. Its application requires a serious commitment by the developer and sometimes requires more of their time. The developer needs to show a willingness to go the extra mile to make this ingredient yield the most benefit for the company and the product that will contain it. To that point, it can require a commitment from the company that can be hard to get. The benefits are not always obvious to those not closely involved in the development process, even with potentially huge financial benefits at stake. This can be frustrating at times and perhaps that is why you don't see it used as much as you would think.

The ingredient I am talking about is used in every successful development project because there is always a customer involved. The most important ingredient in any successful project or any business is how they take care of their customer. Every customer is looking for something from the developer. They want information, product, communication—they want service. Customer service is the ingredient that can make a project or company succeed wonderfully or fail spectacularly.

What is customer service and what makes it so valuable? The very root of it is people dealing with people. In some situations, the product being developed can almost be secondary. Customer service helps your customer succeed. The better the developer understands what defines success for the customer, the better service they can provide. The better your understanding of their idea of success, the more valuable you become to the customer. The more valuable you are to the customer, the more they will pay for your service and come to you with opportunities.

In the case of a developer working on projects for his own company, being recognized as a better service provider, formally or informally, translates into higher pay, promotions, and will-

ingness to go the extra mile to keep you as part of the team. For the developer doing work for an outside customer it can mean all of the above if their efforts are recognized. Also, for the company, it means more opportunities to do business with those customers and a willingness by the customer to pay a little more for a product or spend a little more to make a project fit with your company. All this spells potentially more profit and opportunity for expansion and growth, the life blood of a business. This happens assuming other parts of the process execute to the customer's satisfaction, such as making sure the product gets made to the customer's specifications consistently and on time.

Here are some rules to live by in providing excellent customer service. Some may appear vaguely familiar. The most important one is the first: treat them like you would like to be treated. It sounds simple but it can be tricky in a situation where the customer is always right. We'll talk about that below. Also, sometimes it is difficult to see and transfer what you would like to your customer.

We all like to have open, honest relationships. That can be a hard thing to do, even if you know it is the right thing to do. In business, embarrassing mistakes sometimes occur. You are faced with situations where, if you keep quiet, the customer may never know about it other than they see the product delivered a little late or some data strangely skewed in one direction. No matter how painful it may be, you have to be honest with them and take responsibility for the mistake. Depending on the size of the blunder, you may be able to get by with just a "We screwed up, but we will fix it" and the customer will not press for the painful details. Sometimes, though, you have to explain the whole situation.

The pain, embarrassment, and cost of explaining a mistake and fixing it should make you a better developer because it will remind you not to repeat the mistake and it will encourage you to set up systems to keep it from happening again. In testing, especially in scale ups, some of the goofiest, unexpected things can pop up that can screw up a test no matter how much you prepare for it. The customer more often than not understands this. If you make a mistake and it is clearly your fault, do not expect the customer to pay for it.

Being honest about making mistakes helps build the relationship and credibility, but it doesn't make the mistake go away or somehow not count. If there are too many mistakes, the customer may well go elsewhere. This is when you have to remember customer service is helping the customer succeed. If you have been honest with them, they will likely be honest with you and will give you warning or outright tell you they are leaving. Help them find another vendor or solution. Then remind yourself about rule number two: what goes around comes around, or put another way, one good deed deserves another. Then you have to take a hard look at what transpired and decide how to keep those things from happening again. When you think you have your house in order, call the customer and tell them. If you demonstrated to them before that you wanted them to succeed they will give you that second chance.

Some will say, but what about the unreasonable customer who places ridiculous demands on us? If you have been honest with them about what is going on and seen how they respond to admitted mistakes, you will have a good sense of how they are. If they are putting ridiculous demands on you, this openness and honesty will make these unreasonable demands stand out. You should probably cut ties and save everyone some money and frustration. In my many years of working with customers, I have run into very few that are unreasonable or have ridiculous expectations. What usually weeds these customers out are the fees. Ask for money for your time or testing, explaining the reasons for it, and the customer will quickly become more reasonable (there is now a price they are paying to meet their demands) or they suddenly disappear. Nearly all of the people will be reasonable just like you and me (my teenager may debate this description). If they are insistent on their expectations, you need to dive in and understand why they are important to them and why they should be important to you. Understand what their definition of success is.

So where does the phrase, “the customer is always right” fit into this relationship you are building with the customer? The customer is always right even when they are wrong. You can’t win an argument with a customer. They know best what will bring them success. We need to understand those perspectives. We can have an opinion and for honesty’s sake you have to express it, especially if it is significantly different than the customer’s. It goes back to how you express it. Opinions are subjective, especially when you are talking about product attributes. There is no right or wrong. The customer’s opinion counts most because they are the ones held accountable within their department or company for it.

Another area of customer service where it is easy to fall down is rule number three: communication. This is where rule number one, treat them like you would like to be treated, can be hard to follow. Make a habit of updating the customer on the status of a project on a regular basis even when there is nothing to update. They need to know this, too, because they have no other way of keeping up to date. It is difficult to realize what you know and easy to take for granted knowledge that they do not have. An important point is to keep the communication concise and to the point.

Lastly, rule number four: give it to them before they know they want it. This is taking rule number one, treat them like you would like to be treated, to the extreme. A good example of this can be found above, at rule number three. Look at the status of the project from their perspective. Tell them what is going on even when something isn’t, because, put in their place, you would want to know as well. You can only do this if you are sincerely interested in seeing them succeed. It has to be personal to a certain extent, depending on the customer.

In the end everyone wins with good customer service. Your company gets new business and future opportunities. The customer has a new team member they can count on to help them succeed. You, the developer, win big also. You have become a proven asset to the customer and your employer, which has its material benefits. You also become a better person because you have had to put part of yourself aside to look at things through someone else’s eyes. That ability will help you succeed in every part of your life.

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Continue the Legacy



The AACC International Foundation established the **Joseph Warthesen Young Professional Symposia Endowment Fund** shortly after his death in 2003. Joe was a long time member and past president. He was a tireless volunteer on many activities and a friend to so many colleagues. A recipient of many university teaching awards, Joe taught more than 2,500 students the principles of food chemistry, food analysis, and related topics.

This endowment will fund an annual event designed by and for young professionals at the AACC International Annual Meetings. The funds will enable the Young Professional Committee to organize and pay for speaker expenses associated with the event as well as other potential activities for young professionals. Last year the Young Professional Committee organized a social to gather feedback on what the young professional needs are within AACC International.

You can help continue Joe’s legacy by donating to the Joseph Warthesen Young Professional Symposia Endowment Fund. AACC International is a 501(c)(3) organization, qualified to accept tax-deductible contributions during donor lifetime or bequests by will.

