

## Podcast 482: Excellence in Customer Service with Catherine Hafer

### Episode Transcript

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**Julie Walker:** Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, "IEW." My name is Julie Walker, and I'm honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

**Julie Walker:** So Andrew, have you ever been in line in a restaurant or maybe at Starbucks or something and the person in front of you was super grumpy and you just felt so bad for the barista that was taking their order?

**Andrew Pudewa:** It's more likely to happen at an airport because I don't like Starbucks, and I try not to stand in lines by avoiding restaurants as much as possible. But I do have tremendous compassion for people who work in the airline industry because the only time anyone wants to talk to them is because they have a problem, and it's just continuous all day long, especially if there's delays and all that. And I do have a great empathy for people in that situation.

**Julie Walker:** You know that there are studies on good customer service and the best way to get good customer service?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, I've studied it, but I don't know what you're referring to. I know the trick.

**Julie Walker:** What's the trick?

**Andrew Pudewa:** Smile at people.

**Julie Walker:** exactly, and to be a good customer. If you are a good customer, you will get good customer service.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I edged my way on plane that was all closed out because I was the sweetest customer.

**Julie Walker:** You are. You are so nice, Andrew. You really are a nice man. S

o we have an amazing customer service department, and I believe that it's a both/and conversation. I think it's both. We have the best customers, but we also have an incredible

customer service team who is very intentional about providing good customer service because, and this is actually true, and this is in their training manual. They want to be the voice of Andrew Pudewa.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well, I certainly appreciate that and it, I hear everywhere I go, at least a couple times, people say, you have the best customer service of any company I've had to deal with. So I'm happy about that. Congratulations.

**Julie Walker:** Well, thank you, but actually congratulations really needs to go to, we actually have a team of customer service leaders because we consider our customer service department to include everyone who is talking to schools, anyone who is talking to our resellers, anyone who is talking directly to our parent-teachers, and so that's actually three departments plus this fourth department that we created this year to help both the schools and the customers, called customer support specialists. And we actually have today in our podcast studio our manager of customer support. And that is Catherine. Catherine, thank you for joining us today.

**Catherine Hafer:** Thank you for having me.

**Julie Walker:** So I thought it would be fun, Andrew, let Catherine share some of her secrets of how she trains her team to interact with customers. And we have this philosophy of customer service called the Six Hats of Customer Service. Yes.

**Andrew Pudewa:** The Six Hats? Okay, well let's hear about it. Are they in a particular order?

**Catherine Hafer:** No. There we start with our cheerful leader. This is somebody who cheerfully leads the conversation. So generally you think that the person who's going to lead the conversation is going to be the person who's calling, but we know they're calling because they need help and we have the help that they need. So we cheerfully lead them through that conversation to provide the best help possible. So that is accomplished with a smile on our face. Guess who we learn that from?

**Julie Walker:** Well, Andrew Pudewa

**Catherine Hafer:** Of course, he just said it. If you have a smile on your face, they can hear that in our tone, and so that's very important that we smile.

**Julie Walker:** And I have to mention, Andrew, this is one of your secret weapons that you mention in your motivation talk. So we'll put a link in our show notes for that talk because a smile and I love hearing you say to me or to the team, I can hear. Your smile through the phone, even though they can't see you, Catherine, they can hear your smile.

**Catherine Hafer:** Absolutely. Yes, we have. I mean, if you were to walk through our office, you would see sticky notes on people's desks that say, don't forget to smile, especially in the summer when we're very busy.

**Julie Walker:** So we're getting close to that busy season right now. I also will share with our listeners that we have these posters, not really posters or pictures. And they're not hats. They're people wearing the hats. And so describe the picture of the cheerful leader hat.

**Catherine Hafer:** She looks like Mary Poppins on a rocket ship, and she is just very happy to accomplish anything that is sent her way.

**Julie Walker:** She is steering that rocketship.

**Catherine Hafer:** She sure is.

**Julie Walker:** What's the next hat?

**Catherine Hafer:** Our next hat is our detective hat, and we get the opportunity to figure out what the customer needs when they call us. Sometimes they don't quite know what it is that they need, and so we get to ask some important questions, understand the heart of the issue, and help them get the help that they need.

**Julie Walker:** What would be an example of one of those questions where you have to put on the detective hat?

**Catherine Hafer:** They're asking for a file, and we don't know maybe where they came across that file or they just know they need the supplemental file. It was in the *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*, and they need help finding how to access that file. So we've got to get into their account, see what they own, and then be able to walk them through that process of finding that file, getting it added to their account.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I'm sure the detective hat does look a lot like Sherlock Holmes style of hat.

**Julie Walker:** Of course it does with the magnifying glass. Yes, absolutely. Okay, so what's the next hat, Catherine?

**Catherine Hafer:** It is the therapist hat.

**Julie Walker:** yes.

**Catherine Hafer:** So the first job that we have is to build a rapport with our customers, to gain their trust and be able to share Mr. Pudewa's wisdom with them in our conversations. So whether that's pointing them to our *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*, a great article, a blog post. It's our job to hear them out and see how we can help.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Do you ever have people cry on the phone?

**Catherine Hafer:** Yes, overwhelmed parents that happens.

**Andrew Pudewa:** I've had conferences where people come up and start just telling you and then they just start, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,

And then they sometimes will cry the opposite, tears of joy. When they get the glimpse of light that yes, this is going to help them. I think people cry because they touch things that are real, right? And so, I don't like the word therapist all that much, but you think about a person who walks you through a process of being able to get to the reality of your situation. There's the pain of it, but also the gratitude that now there's hope.

**Julie Walker:** Yep. So, Catherine, what does the therapist hat look like?

**Catherine Hafer:** It is, you see the back of a therapist. Or what looks like a therapist and a gentleman sitting on a couch with a birthday hat, and he's very happy. So his situation is not necessarily dire, but he definitely is happy that he's getting the help he needs.

**Julie Walker:** So sometimes when I'm overhearing a conversation, I can tell that our customer service agent is just listening. And I can tell they've got the therapist hat on because that's sometimes what people need to do is just share what it is that's on their heart and with some hope, hoping against hope that we can somehow solve their challenges. And if it's related to teaching children to write, most of the time the answer is absolutely we can help.

Okay, so what's the next hat?

**Catherine Hafer:** It's our assistant hat. This is where IEW customer service agents will do the nuts and bolts of customer service. So we're providing account information, helping them to place an order, finding the information that they need, and really be able to understand how we can assist them. What is it that they need?

So whether that is a school, we would send them to our school's team. So knowing that difference so that we can provide them with the best customer service so they go to the right team.

**Julie Walker:** And so what does that hat look like?

**Catherine Hafer:** That is a parent teaching a student how to cook. Right? And they're cutting something.

**Julie Walker:** A little chefs hat.

**Catherine Hafer:** yeah.

**Julie Walker:** Like a sous chef?

**Catherine Hafer:** Right. They're assisting.

**Andrew Pudewa:** What is a sous chef? I've heard the term, but...

**Julie Walker:** In my, in my world, a sous chef is someone that helps me put the dinner together, whatever that means—chopping the vegetables or stirring the soup or,...

**Andrew Pudewa:** gosh. In my world, that's just grandchildren.

**Julie Walker:** Well, absolutely. Okay, and the next hat is...

**Catherine Hafer:** It's our consultant hat, so this hat is very important. It is our job to find out what the customer needs or the student needs are and their interest. Are they needing help with grammar or spelling? And then point them in the direction of the right product. We never have a sales tone with our customers. We want to consult them. We want to provide them with the best information about our curriculum and allow them to make the best choice for their students..

**Andrew Pudewa:** Years back, I'm not sure what year we did this shift, but at conventions we stopped selling stuff. And that was kind of radical. In fact, some of the other people I know that do conventions were surprised, like, you're not selling anything? People will come up. And then they discover, no, you can't buy it right now. And sometimes they're disappointed, but I think the overall effect is it just takes all the pressure off. Like I don't have to decide right now. And then there's a freedom that exists in the conversation that people know you're not here to make money from me.

I think this is one of the best things about our booth at conventions is we're there to be that, sometimes a therapist, but usually it's matching up the needs with the possible solutions to those needs. And there's a kind of a relaxedness that contributes to overall peace and joy on both sides. So I'm glad we did that.

**Catherine Hafer:** Yes. Many customers will mention, "Oh, well, do I need to remember your name so that I can call back and speak to you so you get credit for this sale?" And it's wonderful to explain to them that that's not how we operate. Everyone is just as knowledgeable and it is our job to inform them about our product. And we're not selling product. We are sharing our product with you to help your students be great writers and communicators. And they're just amazed that that's not the way that we operate. And it's wonderful. Yeah.

**Julie Walker:** We do have as, as Catherine mentioned, we do have these separate teams, but the teams are mostly about specializing in a certain area. When we are selling to schools and we're providing the resources available that we have, that we know will work well in their classroom, oftentimes the teacher who wants to use our material, maybe they were previously a homeschooling parent?

Who knows, Andrew, they, maybe they themselves went through IEW as a student, right? And now they're a teacher, and they want to bring this to their students in their classroom. Well, there's certain permissions that need to be gained from the school administrator, from the school board, and so our school's team is trained to work with anyone at any level to be able to provide that consultation that is needed to make what we believe is the best decision for them to teach English composition in their classrooms.

It's kind of nice working with a homeschooling parent because they are the teacher, the school board, the principal, they're everything, and so they can pretty much make the decisions on

the spot, but then if they want to make a decision on the spot and they're at a convention, as they say, they can literally just go make the order on their phone, and we can help them with that if they need that help. But nope, no selling at booths anymore.

**Catherine Hafer:** And our last hat is our marketer hat. This is where we work to make sure that our brand is clearly communicated, and everyone is aware of that, including our team of ambassadors. These are our friends who love IEW and share it with their community. So it is our job to make sure that whether we're at a convention, as we've mentioned, or a live event or a training here, that we are all speaking the same language and sharing the same message.

**Julie Walker:** Right, and so this is just another way to make sure that our customer service team is aware of everything that we're doing because there's a lot going on around here, Andrew. We've got podcasts, we've got blog posts, we've got events, we've got webinars. And so our customer service teams help to expand this message of what we're doing.

And that's why this is actually our newest hat is the marketing hat. So we've got things to market. I forgot to ask what the consultation hat is. Do we talk about what the picture looks like?

**Catherine Hafer:** Yes, it's a gentleman on a whiteboard with all of these different products and theories and he's just bringing some light to that.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So it's one of those hardhats with a flashlight attached?

**Julie Walker:** I think it's more like a businessman's hat where he is writing formulas on the board. Sometimes it feels like that. Like, okay, if we connect this person to this person and then we have to talk to this person and yeah, just doing the consultation. And of course the marketing hat. It's not so much the hat, it's kind of the straw hat that you see in the classic carney show, like come and you see this show, but then he also has some bags to give away.

**Andrew Pudewa:** And these hats are like image-based mnemonic.

**Julie Walker:** Exactly.

**Andrew Pudewa:** So you kind of remember the mode I'm in.

**Julie Walker:** Yes, exactly. Exactly. And so these are surrounding our customer service room. And so we'll include some pictures of these hats in our show notes so our customers can see when they're calling, what kind of questions and maybe they can figure out, oh, well actually I have a question for you. "Could you please put on your therapist hat?" And then maybe it could be easier for especially some of our newer members of our team to be able to shift their thinking that way.

One thing that we pride ourselves in with our customer service team is that we are very intentional about training. Every year we bring on a few new people, and what we like to do is regardless of where they serve, because we have people that are serving in Florida, South

Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, State of Washington, Georgia. I'm forgetting some places, Arkansas, Tennessee. Yes, of course. We like to bring them in when they're first starting, just to be sure that they kind of embrace that culture of IEW, so that when they're going off to their home office and they're connecting with us virtually, they still feel a part of this great community of teams that serve IEW and you, Andrew.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well and I tease them because it's kind of like hazing in a little bit, right? You have a lot of things you have to do to get fully qualified, I guess. And I fear one of those things is they have to watch a good number of hours of me and they have to do all the writing assignments of the TWSS, and so that seems time consuming. It seems really: Is this necessary? Isn't there just the database of answers? but don't we just have an AI that can answer all the questions? Why do we have to invest so much to learn? But again and again, I've heard people say, your person who I talked on the phone was so knowledgeable. And of course that brings great joy to my heart.

**Julie Walker:** Exactly. So I know it seems a little bit odd, almost self-promoting to spend a whole podcast talking about our customer service and why it's so important to us. But I think in this world of AI, as you mentioned, Andrew and online ordering, and yes, you can find all of our products on Amazon and many of our resellers, but regardless of where you purchase our materials, regardless of, even if you got it used from a friend. We are here to help.

We don't want to commit one of the four deadly errors of customer service. That's a wink wink to Andrew's talk, the *Four Deadly Errors of Teaching Writing*. We don't want to withhold help. We want people to know that we are here for them, that we've got resources available, starting with, of course, our customer service team.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Well now in the world of online everything, so often you go to a chat and it says, hi, I'm your AI chat agent, Jerome or whatever. And my thought is I don't wanna talk to you. If you could answer the question I have, I would've already found the answer. And so we will, I don't know, never say never, but as far as I'm concerned, we will never go to a AI-based chat screening. And then you have to wait even longer to get connected with a real person. No, we are all real people.

**Julie Walker:** We are all real people here. And we do have a chat function on our website. If it's outside of office hours, then that chat will go to an email, and that email will be responded to generally within one to two business days. So maybe there's a little bit more delay, but every time our office is open nine to five central time, there is a live person helping with chats.

And I've seen them, my daughter-in-law is actually one of them. I've seen some of our agents handle more than one chat at a time, just because they're capable of doing that because once the person gets the question answered, they might have another one and it needs to be formulated. In the meantime, I can switch over to this other question I love.

I love personally as a consumer, I love chat. I'm more inclined to start a chat conversation than to pick up the phone and be put on hold for a very long time, which is another thing I want to mention. Catherine, what I love about our customer service team is when our hold times start to get longer. And what would you say is your rule of thumb before you dial up another team?

**Catherine Hafer:** Less than five minutes.

**Julie Walker:** Yeah, so we like to keep our hold times less than five minutes, and they have this whole list of people that they can dial up and bring into the phone queue if we start getting bogged down. I will mention though, speaking of chat, and this is just the way it is, if we're getting bogged down, those customer service agents who are helping out with chat are asked to log out of chat so that they can take the phone calls because we do have to keep the phones going. But I think it's a good system,

**Andrew Pudewa:** a hierarchy of needs

**Julie Walker:** Kind of that. Very much so. Very much so. Well, thank you, Catherine, for being with us today, and thank you for all you do to serve our company here at IEW, with all the teams that you manage as well as helping with our customer service.

**Catherine Hafer:** It's my pleasure. I love this job.

**Andrew Pudewa:** Thank you

**Julie Walker:** Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at [IEW.com/podcast](http://IEW.com/podcast). Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.