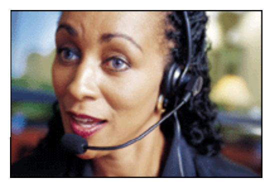
The Path
to Excellence



PPOS Group
Customer Service Guide

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Introduction

This guide is a simple and easy-to-use reference that provides examples and tips on how to better serve our customers.

We hope this guide stimulates a heightened awareness among our coworkers of the importance that Customer Service has in doing our job. Every person we come in contact with, be it inside or outside of FFAS deserves the best service possible. We truly hope that this guide is a step toward effectively communicating with our internal and external customers and will present a more favorable image of HRD.

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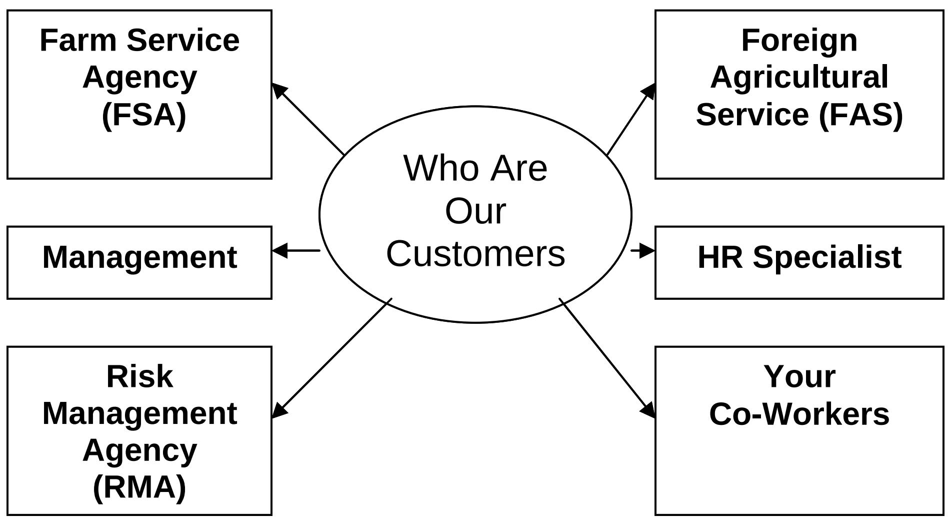
Who Are Our Customers?



Our customers deserve our best effort as well as our respect and courtesy.

What we do?

- Provide timely, accurate customer service, based on established procedures and best practices;
- Process personnel actions, including input of the documents to NFC;
- Ensure that personnel actions are processed timely and recorded accurately and completely;
- Conduct new employee orientation;
- Provide personnel data reports upon requests;
- File and maintain personnel reports, including official personnel Folders (OPF's), and eOPF;
- Issue Notifications of Personnel Actions, SF-50s, to employees in a timely manner;
- Process court-ordered deductions:
  - Child support/alimony
  - Commercial garnishments
  - Bankruptcies
  - Student Loans

USDA

PPOS Group

PPOS Pledge

- Our customers deserve our best effort as well as our respect and courtesy.

- On the first call from you, our customer, we will say:
    - What we can do immediately and what will take longer,
    - When it will be done, and
    - Who will handle your request

- We will call you if anything changes from what we first said, give you a status report, and explain what will happen next.

- We will have staff available from 8:15 a.m. until 4:45 p.m. Eastern Time to answer your calls. If you leave a message, we will return the call within 24 hours of receipt.

- We will acknowledge your letter/email within 24 hours of receipt.

- We will be responsive, reasonable, and professional when communicating with our internal/external customers.

- We will strive to develop innovative and effective solutions for issues, concerns, and challenges involving our customers.

Communicating With
Your Customer

Telephone

Telephone Courtesy Tips….

- ***Greet your caller using your name.***
- ***Use the full name of your Department, Division, or Group (e.g. Payroll, Personnel Operations Section). Avoid using internal acronyms.***
- ***Obtain permission from the caller before using the speakerphone***
- ***Ask your caller if it so okay to put him/her o hold and provide an estimated timeframe for when you will come back.***

Answer the Telephone/Greet the Customer

• Clear your thoughts. • Focus on the customer as soon as you pick up the receiver. • Answer with a cheerful voice and with a smile!	Example: "Good afternoon, this is [name] of [Department, Division or group]. How may I help you?"

Assess the Purpose of the Call

1. Listen Effectively.

- Listen carefully to your customer.
- Ask clarifying questions.
- Have patience.

Make your customer feel that his/her request or problem is important to you by using phrases that show: • Acknowledgment, • Appreciation, • Affirmation, and • Assurance.	Example: "Yes, it must be frustrating to not have your check arrive on time." "I appreciate your patience." "I agree with you; 6 months is a long time to wait for an SF 1150." (annual/sick leave) "I apologize . . . I assure you that I will personally handle your request."

Determine Situations That Require Special Handling.

Is your customer…. • Angry or frustrated? • Distressed? • Misdirected? • Someone with disabilities?	

Telephone (Cont”d)

4. *Summarize the Information, Problem, or Request*.

Restate the information, problem, or request as you understand it.	Example: "Mr. [Customer], let me be sure I have the correct facts. You contacted us 2 months ago regarding your pension benefit. We told you that we would send an application package to you, and you have not received it to date. Is this correct?"

Take Action To Resolve the Problem

- Take ownership of the problem.
- Be flexible in your solution.
- Know when to direct or elevate the problem to someone else

OUR SERVICE PLEDGE “… On the first call from you, our customer, we will say: • What we can do immediately and what will • take longer, • When it will be done, and • Who will handle your request…..”	Example: "I will personally see to it that your request is handled. I am going to transfer you to Mr. [Pension Law Specialist], as he handles these requests. I will follow up with him tomorrow to confirm that your application was sent. I will then call you 1 week from today to confirm that you have received the package."

1. Direct the Call to the Appropriate Expert.

DON'T HANG UP YET! • Introduce the caller upon transfer. • Make sure the person you transfer the call to is the right person. • Provide an overview of the problem, issue, or request. If the expert is not available, let customers know that you will have the appropriate person get back to them to handle their request. Find out when they will be available for a call back.	Example: Transfer the Call: "Good morning, Mr. [Pension Law Specialist]. I have Mr. [Customer] on the telephone who was told 2months ago that he would receive an application package to apply for his pension benefit. To date, he hasn't received the information. Can you please assist Mr. [Customer]?"

Telephone (Cont"d)

2. Elevate the Problem to Management When Necessary.

	Example: "Mr. [Customer], you have every reason to be upset that no one has responded to your request. I will pass on your request to my manager, Ms. [Manager], who will see to it that you get an immediate response. Please hold a moment while I get her on the telephone."]?"

3. Follow Up With Additional Communication.

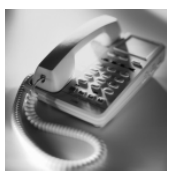
OUR SERVICE PLEDGE ". . . We will call you if anything changes from what we first said, give you a status report, and explain what will happen next . . ." 	Example: "Mr. [Customer], this is [name] calling from FSA/PPOS. I am calling to confirm that you received your benefits application packet. Has that arrived?"

Voice Mail

Personalize Your Voice Mail Greeting

OUR SERVICE PLEDGE " . . . If you leave a message, we will return the call within 24 hours of receipt . . ."	**Sample Greeting:** "Hello, you have reached [name] of the [Department, Division, or group]. Today is [day], [date], and I am in the office today, however I'm unavailable to assist you at the present time. Please leave your name, telephone number, and a detailed message and I will return your call as soon as possible. If you require immediate assistance, please contact [Backup Contact's Name] at extension [ext.]. Thank you and have a great day!"

Suggest available backup contacts when possible.



Update Your Voice Mail Greeting

• Record an Extended Absence Greeting if you will be out of the office for more than one day. • Suggest backup contacts when possible. **Tips for Changing Your Voice Mail Greeting(s)…..**	**Sample Greeting:** "Hello, you have reached [name] of the [Department, Division, or group]. I will be out of the office from [day], [date], and returning on [day], [date]. Please contact [Backup Contact's Name] at extension [ext.] should you require immediate assistance. If you would like to leave a message, please leave your name, number, and the reason for your call, and I will contact you upon my return. Thank you and have a great day!"

Electronic Mail

Electronic mail is a quick and easy form of communication. Keep in mind that once you press **Send**, your message is signed, sealed, and delivered!

Check to ensure names are correct on the Send To line. ***Insert a meaningful subject line.*** ***Personalize your message with a polite greeting.*** ***Use plain language.*** ***Keep electronic mail short and concise.*** ***Run spell check before sending.*** ***Do not send messages that include inflammatory, harsh, or foul language.*** ***Avoid use of all UPPERCASE letters. Such messages are hard to read and may be interpreted as "shouting."*** ***Re-read your mail message for clarity before sending.***	**Negative Message/Words Misspelled** From: John Deere To: Jack Daring Subject: See Me ASAP Date: Thursday, January 28, 2006 8:51AM SEE ME WHEN YOU GET IN. THE EXECUTIVE BREIFING IS SCHEDULED FOR 9:00 AND I NEED TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT THE COST ANALYSIS YOU PREPAIRED. **Positive Message** From: John Deere To: Jack Daring Subject: Meeting This Morning Date: Thursday, January 28, 2006 8:51AM Jack, The executive briefing is scheduled for 9:00 a.m. As soon as you arrive, let's meet to review and discuss the cost analysis you prepared. Thanks.

Misdirected Electronic Mail

Please take action to re-direct electronic mail that is sent to you accidentally.

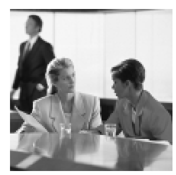
Action Steps:

1. Forward the electronic mail to the proper recipient immediately; OR
2. Contact the sender to explain that you received his/her message in error.

Personal Contact

Our body language (eye contact, facial expressions, body posture, hand gestures, etc.) is a constant stream of nonverbal communication that sometimes can conflict with what we say.

Face-to-Face

• Make your customer feel welcome! Greet customers by introducing yourself and shaking hands. Ask for your customer's name so that you can personalize your conversation. • Maintain eye contact. Show your customers that you really care, and you want to hear what they have to say. • Use a relaxed and friendly facial expression. **Tip . . . Adjust your expression to suit the situation if a customer is angry, upset, etc.** • "Show your customers through your actions that they have your undivided attention	  
Body Language To USE • **Nod your head (show acknowledgement).** • **Lean forward (show interest).** • **Stand up if your customer is standing; likewise, sit down if your customer is seated.** **Positive body language shows that you are interested in what your customer has to say.**	**Body Language To AVOID** • Looking at your watch repeatedly. • Stepping or leaning away. • Turning away from the customer. • Shuffling papers on your desk. • Placing hands on hips while standing. • Rolling of the eyes Negative body language can suggest that you are not interested and have something more important to deal with.

Personal Contact (Cont'd)

Use open hand gestures as a courteous way to point at an object or person. **Avoid** the "pointed finger" gesture, particularly at close range. This often communicates and solicits anger or hostile feelings. **Be aware** of your customer's sensitivities. Touching is a sensitive subject. A handshake is the safest form of contact. Avoid all other physical contact. Respect your customer's personal space.	 

Tip . . . Maintain 2 to 4 feet of space between you and your customer to keep your interaction zone comfortable. We all enjoy our personal space.

Walk-Ins (Security Guard not available at desk)

You may encounter a customer, vendor, or other visitor who requires assistance.
You can assist walk-ins by doing the following

1. Assess.	**Example:** "May I help you? Are you here to see a specific person, or here about a particular matter?"
2. Identify.	**Example:** "Do you have the name of the person you wish to see, or do you know the department that you wish to visit?"
3. Assist. Use guard's telephone to call the appropriate party to announce the visitor. Then, escort the visitor to the appropriate suite/location.	**Security Note:** DO NOT give visitors access to the suite without an escort.

Correspondence

OUR SERVICE PLEDGE

". . . We will acknowledge your letter/e-mail within 24 hours of receipt . . ."

Written communication, although very powerful, can sometimes lead to miscommunication. Below are some helpful tips for communicating with others through written correspondence

<table>
<tr>
<td rowspan="2">Written Correspondence

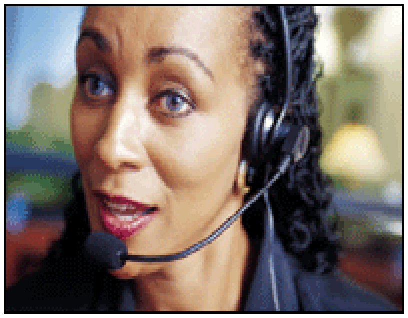
Helpful Tips . . .
Use plain language.
Be concise.
Avoid use of Jargon
Use positive words.
Be objective.
Use an active voice. Avoid use of negative words/phrases.</td>
<td>Negative Statements
We did not make a determination because the standard termination material you sent us is incomplete.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Statements
Please complete the standard termination material so we can determine if. . .</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words, Phrases to Avoid</td>
<td>Words, Phrases to Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><table><tr><td>No
Never
In no way.</td><td>Not
Unfortunately
Neither . . . nor</td></tr></table></td>
<td>Yes, I will help you
I understand your concern
Here are some options</td>
</tr>
</table>

Misdirected Correspondence

Action Steps:

1. Place the correspondence in the outgoing mail pickup box in your area, OR
2. Deliver the correspondence personally to the recipient, OR
3. Place the correspondence in the internal mailbox, return to sender with a note.

Special Situations



Angry or Frustrated Customers

"CAN'T YOU IDIOTS DO ANYTHING RIGHT?!"

An Irate Customer Call

1	**LISTEN. Allow the customer time to vent.** Let angry or frustrated customers vent--it helps to defuse their anger. They will then be able to state their issues, and you will be able to help with their problems.	**Tips . . .** • ***Take a deep breath.*** • ***Place yourself in their shoes.*** • ***Empathize with their situation.*** • ***Stay Calm***
2	**DEFUSE the *situation*** Show your customers that you empathize with their situation. This demonstrates that you respect their point of view, and it allows you to move on to business.	**Examples:** "I understand that you've left four messages and have received no return call. How frustrating that must be! I apologize for that happening." "You are right. Three attempts to get this resolved is unreasonable. Let me help."
3	**COMMUNICATE effectively.** Choose your words carefully. Certain words can invite angry or nonproductive responses from your customer.	
	Words to Use • Will you … • I am going to … • I apologize … • Can you tell me … • What has happened …	**Words to Avoid** • It is not our policy . . . • I'll try . . . • Would you mind . . . • I want you to . . . • It's required (or necessary) . . . • I'm sorry . . .

Angry or Frustrated Customers (Cont'd)

4	**SHOW RESPECT.** Treat the customer with respect. Always maintain a professional attitude, regardless of what the customer says. **REMEMBER . . .** **No one has the right to abuse you through use of bad language or ethnic/racial slurs.**	**Example:** (Customer is using offensive or foul language.) You respond: "Sir/Madam, I really want to help you, but I am having a difficult time with the language you are using." (Customer continues to be offensive.) You respond: "Sir/Madam, I really want to help you. I believe it would be best if I have my supervisor join us on the line to help us resolve this issue."
	AVOID the "HOOKS." Do not allow an angry customer to take control of the situation by inviting you into irrational or angry behavior. 	
	Sample Hooks "You people don't know what you're doing!" "You obviously don't know what you're talking about!" "Can't you idiots do anything right?"	***Sample Responses*** "It sounds like you haven't received the assistance you requested, and that must be frustrating. Please let me help you." "I would like to help you resolve the problem. Let me make sure I understand. You said . . ." "If you will give me the opportunity, I will help you."
6	**FOLLOW THROUGH** As stated in the PPOS Customer Service pledge, always call back as promised.	**Example:** "I am calling as a follow-up to our conversation this morning. Was our [Expert] able to get your accounting payroll corrections straightened out?"

Angry or Frustrated Customers (Cont'd)

7	**SAY NO when absolutely necessary.** Regulation, policy, or law may prevent you from giving the customer exactly what he/she ask for. (Note: State law or regulation for clarification)	**Example** **I understand your situation, However, law/regulation XYZ prevents us from doing that.**
8	**DOCUMENT your actions.** Document your calls and the actions you have taken. Documentation can serve as an important future reference. Document immediately--80 percent of the conversation is forgotten within minutes.	
	Documentation may be important if . . • **The customer says something different in a later telephone call or in later correspondence.** • **You need to refresh your memory before calling the customer back.** • **Your supervisor requests information.** • **A problem arises. Documentation will support USDA/FSA position in the event of a lawsuit or defending our policy**	

Distressed Customers

1. LISTEN. *Allow customers to express their feelings.*

Allow customers to express their feelings so that you can determine the level of emotion involved (e.g., upset, confused, panicked, and scared). Using reflective listening skills, identify how best to deal with the situation.

Reflective Listening Responses	**Example:**
# It sounds like . . . # It seems like . . . # It looks like . . . # It appears that . . .	"It sounds like your security file missing is extremely upsetting for you"

2. EMPATHIZE.	**Example:**
Empathy is a response that allows you to communicate your acceptance of the customer's point of view without necessarily agreeing. **Empathetic Responses** # I hear what you are saying . . . # I know what you mean . . . # I can understand that you are upset . . .	"How upsetting it must be to have your personal information not accounted for" "I hear what you're saying. I would be upset if my paycheck had not been deposited in my bank on time due to processing errors."

3. DETERMINE COURSE OF ACTION.

Assess the information you have received. Determine the course of action. Tell the customer what you are going to do and when you will do it.

Situations Specific to PPOS Customers

This section presents various situations that are unique to PPOS. Sample scripts are presented to assist you in dealing with specific situations. The first scenario, "The New Hire" reports to duty to complete employee orientation without a SF52 on record. Unfortunately, the Staffing Specialist failed to advise PPOS assistant of the new hire. This example reflects the combined skills noted throughout this guide.

The New Hire without SF-52

The following script is a typical PPOS scenario, dealing with a new hire orientation with no paperwork, i.e., SF 52 record or prior notification.

Scenario:
You receive a call from the guard's desk that a new hire has reported for duty. The Staffing Specialist failed to advise you of the new hire. The staffing specialist and the staffing specialist backup are out of the office.

Recommended Actions

Greeting

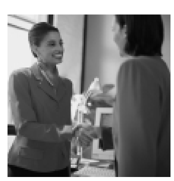
PPOS Employee: Good morning, this is [name] of [Department, Division, or group]. You are here for your orientation today, Good to see you.

Seek Information and Perform Service

Find a Location for the Employee to sit.

PPOS Employee:
1. First, let me get your name, address, daytime telephone number, and Social Security number.
2. Gather orientation information and precede orientation (Note: Because enough notice was not given to prepare typed paperwork, you would have to hand write information. Remember, the new employee is not aware of the internal communication breakdown. Therefore, do not share with him or her the situation.)
3. After the orientation, return to your desk and notify staffing specialist in an email regarding the situation that occurred with the new hire. (It would be recommended that you copy your supervisory as well as the staffing specialist supervisor on email).

NOTE: With the implementation of the EOD spreadsheet on the S-drive, this situation should be limited.



Garnishment and Child Support Scenario

The following script depicts a distressed custodial parent who has not received his/her child support payment.

Scenario:
The custodial parent has contacted you regarding a non-receipt of payment. The custodial parent is upset and all they want to know is when they can expect to receive the money. You checked the database and you noticed that the money was withheld from the employee's wages to pay the child support.

Recommended Actions:

Listen & Assess
<u>Customer:</u> I filed a court order two months ago and still I have not received any payment. This isn't right, it is just not fair! What am I to do, how am I supposed to pay my bills? I want to speak to someone who understands my situation!

Show Empathy & Concern
<u>PPOS Employee:</u> It sounds like this has been a terribly upsetting experience for you. First, let me get some information from you about the facts of your case. How does that sound?

Customer: Well, okay, I really appreciate your assistance.

Seek Information
<u>PPOS Employee</u>: Great. If you will answer some questions for me, I will see how I can help you.

1. What is your full name, address, and daytime telephone number?
2. What is your Social Security number?
3. What State/Local office garnishment was ordered?
3. What is the case number noted on your letter, and when is the letter dated?
4. Can you tell me who signed the letter?

Okay, let me confirm your information by reading it back to you . . .

Confirm Action
<u>PPOS Employee:</u> I have verified that the payment has been withheld:
Give date, where payment was sent etc…

Ask the custodial parent to check with bank and the child support disbursement center again, after you have confirmed that money has been deducted.

Again, my name is [name] and my telephone number is [number]. Please feel free to call me if you have additional questions.

An Irate Employee Request for SF-50 and Pay Statement

The following script depicts an angry employee whose request for SF-50 and pay statement have not been actioned.

Scenario:
An employee contacted you stating that they need their two most recent pay statements and their most recent SF-50. The employee mentioned that they were at their mortgage lender's office and they needed the documents immediately due to settlement.

Recommended Actions:

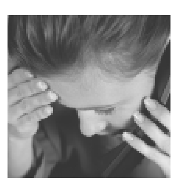
Listen & Assess
Employee: I want to talk to your supervisor, I need help right now. I am at the mortgage lenders office and I need a copy of my two most recent pay statements and SF50. I want to speak to your supervisor right now! I don't want to talk to anyone else! Don't put me on hold and don't transfer me . . . I've already been transferred twice and I have to close the settlement today!

Defuse the Situation; Show Understanding, Agreement, & Concern
PPOS Employee: Mr. [Customer], I can imagine that you really want to get this transaction settled today. I will help you; we're here to assist you.

Seek Information
PPOS Employee: First, I'd like to ask you some questions that will help me to confirm your identity.

1. Okay sir, what is your full name, address
2. What is your Social Security number?
3. What is your Date of Birth?

Okay, let me confirm your information by reading it back to you . . .
PPOS Employee: Once your identity has been confirmed, I will fax the requested information directly to Settlement Office. Again, my name is [name] and my telephone number is [number]. Please feel free to call me if you have additional questions. I understand that this is a difficult time for you, and I am glad to help.



Incorrect Processing of SF-52

The following script depicts an employee request for answers regarding incorrect processing of SF-52.

Scenario:
You are scheduled to be out of the office for the next two days. You have completed everything on your desk. You have the next pay period's processing in a folder waiting for your return. While you are out, the Staffing Specialist advised the Manager that they need to change the date of an action which needs to be processed immediately. The SF-52 was changed and given to your colleague to process. You colleague processed the SF-52 and you later found out that it was processed incorrectly. The error has generated a bill and the employee is calling you for answers.

Recommended Actions:

1. **Notify your colleague who processed the information incorrectly, Ask them to go back and correct the error in the system.**
2. **Make sure the action has applied in the system.**
3. **Contact the employee and explain your corrected action as well as the next course of action.**
4. **Follow through to make sure that the customer is satisfied with the situation.**

Conflicting Appointments

The following script depicts a PPOS employee handling a situation relating to conflicting appointments…

Scenario:
You have two new employees that showed up for orientation at 9.00am. There is a staff meeting scheduled at 9.30am. In addition, you are the Customer Service Desk person for the day.

Recommended Actions:

1. Notify your supervisor;
2. Ask your colleagues to help, if their schedule does not permit, then
3. Contact the department's assistant or intern to cover records desk
4. Complete orientation, then attend mandatory meeting. Making sure that your records area has coverage. **(Remember, the customer comes first)**

Practical Do's and Don'ts

- **Do** recognize the employee’s right to know about information held in their file.
- **Do** handle requests for information in a helpful, cheerful, and responsive manner.
- **Don't** ask individuals **why** they want to see a record or obtain information. If they are legally entitled to the information, they need not explain why they need it. On the other hand, if individuals are confused about what information to request, you should try to help. (External Customers)
- **Don’t** share employee information to third parties without their consent and authorization.
- **Do** listen to your customers in any given situation.
- **Do** deal with complaints in a professional manner and display an air of confidentially.
- **Do** be helpful to internal and external customers even if there’s no immediate profit in it.
- **Do** stick to the facts when explaining situations with internal and external customers.
- **Don’t** let your emotions control you when dealing with difficult customers and situations.
- **Do** document any situation that may need explaining.
- **Do** keep records area log books organized and orderly for information to be easily accessible.
- **Don’t** have personal conversations in front of your customers.
- **Don’t** divulge your personal opinions regarding various departments with new hires.

Remember; be proactive, flexible and helpful.