Customer. Service. Two words that can be intimidating when used together, especially for self-employed freelancers like us. Yet customer service is an extremely vital part of running any business, including your freelance business.

I'm Claudia Cesarotti, and after more than 27 years running a successful brick and mortar business, I've added copywriting to my skill set. My brick and mortar business was in a very demanding industry, where customer service could make or break my bottom line. As a result, I had to learn to quickly and accurately assess my client's customer service needs, and in this series, I'll be sharing my hard-won lessons and insights with you.

Why does customer service matter so much? Consider the words of John D. Rockefeller, Sr., a prominent American financier and philanthropist, who founded the Standard Oil Company in the early 1870's and was one of the world's richest and most successful businessmen. He said:

"The ability to deal with people is as purchasable a commodity as sugar or coffee. And, I will pay more for that ability than for any other under the sun."

Considering what he could afford, Rockefeller clearly knew that great customer service is practically priceless. A few decades later, copywriting legend Victor Schwab referenced these words when he was marketing Dale Carnegie's book, How to Win Friends and Influence People. (Ed note: This is a must-read for persuasive writers!)

Carnegie had realized that there was a need for people to learn specific social and communication skills to help them succeed in their business lives. Over 20 years, he had narrowed down key approaches to people interactions at his Institute, and the book was a culmination of his insights. The results his customer-centric methods deliver has made Carnegie's approach the "best in class" standard for service excellence for more than 80 years, and ensured his book remains a best-seller.

So, now that you understand the value of customer service, how can you, as a working writer, improve your client relationships by offering the right kind of customer service to each new client?

Let's start with a few basic guiding principles:

There's a difference between effective customer service and just being a yes-man (or woman) to your client.

It's essential not to treat your client with an attitude of contempt or superiority. Where you can, try to bring them into the decision-making process in a guiding, almost parental manner, without being condescending in any way.

Customer service is an on-going, practiced skill. Each client you work with is coming from a different background… professionally, socially and personally. When you're able to work with a client in a way that speaks to them, you're able to communicate with more effectiveness and clarity.

That last point is key to remember… as popular as one-size fits all templates and tools are in our industry, when it comes to customer service, you'll need to be ready to modify your behavior slightly for each client based on their specific needs.

This is something I've become particularly adept at doing. I've owned a successful pet grooming business for the last 27 years based on the principles above. My demeanor changes depending on who is coming through the front door. I'm always friendly and professional, but depending on the client, I shift to be more personal and familiar or more guiding and helpful. In my case, not only am I working with the client's pet, in most cases dogs, I'm also dealing with the "human" element and that can affect my working relationship with their pet.

I've found that clients fall into a recognizable spectrum. The spectrum runs from 'Very Familiar' (for example, someone who gives you a Christmas present) to 'You're fired, please don't come back'.

All client relationships start off as "Neutral" in the beginning. From there, the opening moves and first projects you do with a client will guide you in terms of which side of the spectrum is the true home of your client. I've found that from this neutral zone, there are two categories we can break it down into very easily:

- 'Positive' clients
- 'Negative' clients

A 'Positive' client would be described as a client who is pleasant to work with, doesn't make unnecessary demands of your time or resources and is generally cooperative and agreeable. If you met them in "Real Life", you might even be friends. An important distinction, however… it is a business

relationship. While being friendly is a must, so is graciously establishing a respectful boundary or perimeter with that client.

A 'Negative' client, on the other hand, is a client who is generally a pain in the back side. They find fault with anything (and everything) you do, tend to make causeless and exorbitant demands and generally can be uncooperative and disagreeable. Knowing how to deal with this type of client is just as important, if not more important, as learning how to effectively deal with positive clients.

In the rest of this series, I'll describe what it takes to work well with both positive and negative client types. I'll give you scenarios, examples, and insights that I've learned over the last 27 years in business that will be helpful to you in your freelance business. In the end, I want you to gain confidence when dealing with your clients in different situations, so that you can improve your writing experience and add to your bottom line.

Customer. Service. Demystified! Stay tuned!