

# ARE YOU BEING SERVED?

Customer service can make or break your relationship with a brand. We reveal the best and worst brands for service according to UK consumers

**W**e asked thousands of UK consumers about the brands they rated most highly for customer service – and those that left them cold.

Lush, Lakeland, First Direct and John Lewis top our league table. Cosmetics firm Lush is the clear winner, the only brand to achieve an ‘excellent’ five-star rating for having knowledgeable and helpful staff, and for making customers feel valued.

Ryanair, Talk Talk and Npower need to pull up their socks, however: these

brands limp into the bottom places in our 2013 customer service survey of 100 big-name brands.

Our regular Which? company satisfaction surveys rate providers within certain sectors – such as supermarkets, energy companies or banks – against their rivals overall, but this survey was different. This time, we have uncovered how the UK’s 100 biggest brands measure up on customer service alone, regardless of what they sell.

## CUSTOMER SERVICE IS KEY

Our survey shows that friendly, helpful, knowledgeable staff and a quick resolution of problems are very influential when it comes to how consumers choose a company – customer service can make or break a relationship with a brand.

Eight out of 10 respondents told us that it is an important factor when deciding which companies to use, 81% agreed that it’s important to them to feel like a valued customer, and 86% >



100 BIG BRANDS RATED FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE

		Knowledge	Staff attitude	Deal with issues	SERVICE SCORE	CUSTOMER SCORE
1	LUSH	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	88%	
2	LAKELAND	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	85%	
3	FIRST DIRECT	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	84%	
=	JOHN LEWIS	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	84%	
5	RAC	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	82%	
6	AMAZON	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	81%	
=	WAITROSE	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	81%	
8	PETS AT HOME	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	80%	
9	WATERSTONES	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	79%	
=	SPECSAVERS	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	79%	
=	DOLLOND & AITCHISON	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	79%	
=	SAINSBURY'S	★★★	★★★	★★★	79%	
13	MARKS & SPENCER	★★★	★★★	★★★★	78%	
14	NATIONWIDE	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	77%	
=	GREEN FLAG	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	77%	
=	SCREWFIX	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	77%	
17	CLARKS	★★★	★★★	★★★	76%	
=	SMILE	★★★	★★★	★★★★	76%	
=	NATWEST	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	76%	
20	HALIFAX	★★★	★★★	★★★	75%	
=	AMERICAN EXPRESS	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	75%	
=	SUPERDRUG	★★★	★★★	★★★	75%	
=	DEBENHAMS	★★★	★★★	★★★	75%	
=	BRITISH AIRWAYS	★★★	★★★	★★★	75%	
=	CARPHONE WAREHOUSE	★★★★	★★★	★★★	75%	
=	APPLE	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	75%	
=	THOMSON	★★★	★★★	★★★	75%	
=	AA	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	75%	
29	PLAY.COM	★★★	★★★	★★★★	74%	
=	LLOYDS PHARMACY	★★★★	★★★	★★★★	74%	
=	HOUSE OF FRASER	★★★	★★★	★★★	74%	
=	IKEA	★★★	★★★	★★★	74%	
=	LLOYDS TSB	★★★	★★★	★★★	74%	
=	MOTHERCARE	★★★	★★★	★★★	74%	
=	HALFORDS	★★★	★★★	★★★	74%	
=	ASDA	★★★	★★★	★★★	74%	
=	GAME RETAIL	★★★★	★★★	★★★	74%	
38	NEXT	★★★	★★★	★★★★	73%	
=	KWIK FIT	★★★	★★★	★★★	73%	
=	FIRST CHOICE	★★★★	★★★	★★★	73%	
=	CLYDESDALE BANK	★★★	★★★	★★★	73%	
=	TESCO	★★★	★★★	★★★	73%	
=	ARGOS	★★★	★★★	★★★	73%	
=	BOOTS	★★★	★★★	★★★★	73%	
=	SHOP DIRECT CATALOGUES (Littlewoods, Kays/K&Co, Very)	★★★	★★★	★★★	73%	
=	B&Q	★★★	★★★	★★★	73%	
=	YORKSHIRE BANK	★★★	★★★	★★★	73%	
=	PRIMARK	★★★	★★★	★★★★	73%	
=	WILKINSONS	★★★	★★★	★★★	73%	
=	ALDI	★★★	★★★	★★★	73%	
51	HSBC	★★★	★★★	★★★	72%	
=	DFS FURNITURE	★★★	★★★	★★★	72%	
=	VIRGIN	★★★	★★★	★★★	72%	
=	EBAY	★★★	★★★	★★★	72%	
=	MORRISONS	★★★	★★★	★★★	72%	
56	PHONES4U	★★★	★★★	★★★	71%	
=	THOMAS COOK	★★★	★★★	★★★	71%	
=	FLYBE	★★★	★★★	★★★	71%	
=	BARCLAYS/BARCLAYCARD	★★★	★★★	★★★	71%	
=	WICKES	★★★	★★★	★★★	71%	
=	TOPSHOP/TOPMAN	★★★	★★	★★★	71%	
62	NEW LOOK	★★★	★★★	★★★	70%	
=	CURRYS/PC WORLD	★★★	★★★	★★★	70%	
=	SANTANDER	★★★	★★★	★★★	70%	
=	SCOTTISH POWER	★★★	★★★	★★★	70%	
=	HOMEBASE	★★★	★★★	★★★	70%	
=	MATALAN	★★	★★★	★★★	70%	
68	MAPLIN	★★★	★★★	★★★	69%	
=	THE CO-OPERATIVE	★★★	★★★	★★★	69%	
=	DUNELM MILL	★★★	★★★	★★★	69%	
=	EASYJET	★★★	★★★	★★★	69%	
=	O2	★★★	★★	★★★	69%	
=	EE (formerly Orange and T-Mobile)	★★★	★★★	★★★	69%	
74	JD SPORTS	★★★	★★★	★★★	68%	
=	SHOE ZONE	★★★	★★★	★★★	68%	
=	MBNA	★★★	★★★	★★★	68%	
=	BANK OF SCOTLAND	★★★	★★★	★★★	68%	
=	CAPITAL ONE	★★★	★★★	★★★	68%	
=	BHS	★★★	★★★	★★★	68%	
=	THE HUT	★★★	★★★	★★★	68%	
=	TOYS R US	★★★	★★★	★★★	68%	
82	POUNDLAND	★★	★★	★★★	67%	
=	WH SMITH	★★★	★★★	★★★	67%	
=	VODAFONE	★★★	★★	★★	67%	
=	EON	★★★	★★★	★★★	67%	
86	ROYAL BANK OF SCOTLAND	★★	★★★	★★★	66%	
=	LIDL	★★	★★	★★★	66%	
=	SPORTS DIRECT	★★★	★★	★★★	66%	
=	SKY	★★★	★★★	★★★	66%	
90	BRITISH GAS	★★★	★★	★★★	65%	
=	THREE	★★★	★★★	★★	65%	
=	POUNDSTRETCHER	★★	★★	★★	65%	
93	SSE	★★★	★★	★★	64%	
94	EDF ENERGY	★★	★★	★★★	63%	
=	BT	★★	★★	★★	63%	
96	TK MAXX	★★	★★	★★★	62%	
=	99P STORES	★★	★★	★★	62%	
98	TALK TALK	★★	★★	★★	59%	
=	NPOWER	★★★	★★	★★	59%	
100	RYANAIR	★★	★★	★★	54%	

Sample: Survey of 3,331 UK residents online. Star ratings: ★★★★★=Excellent, ★★★★=Good, ★★★=Fair, ★★=Poor. Where no star rating, we received insufficient responses to score the retailer. Where companies operate 'sub-brands' (for example Barclays and Barclaycard), we grouped these together if the likely perception is that the overall 'brand' is effectively the same.

## CUSTOMER VIEW

### First Direct (84%)

Lydia Clarkson | from London



Lydia has been a loyal customer of First Direct since 2007 and wouldn't dream of banking elsewhere. Impressed with their 'brilliant' online

banking and their telephone service, she says: 'There is never any waiting in a queue, no buttons to press for options – you're straight in, talking to a real person in the UK. The staff are always friendly and helpful.'

Lydia recently lost £250 when she bought furniture from a firm that then went bust. 'First Direct dealt with the problem quickly and efficiently, providing me with contact details for the administrator, the correct forms to fill out and a clear explanation of what to do.' Within a week of the forms' return, the full sum was refunded to her bank account.

She explains her loyalty to First Direct: 'It might not have the best interest rates on savings or the cheapest insurance, but it is just really good at being a bank. It offers a fuss-free, reassuring service that has never let me down.'

## CUSTOMER VIEW

### Sky (66%)

Chris Harper | from Surrey



Chris Harper was left £64 out of pocket after Sky failed to deliver the HD box he'd ordered and refused to take responsibility.

Online customer advisors told Chris to expect to receive a new box, and assured him twice that the complaints team would call within 48 hours.

Nothing happened. When Chris got through to the complaints team himself, he was told that it was his responsibility to resolve the problem with the courier who had been contracted by Sky. Chris wrote a formal complaint and letter to the CEO, getting no response, so issued a court summons. Only then 'an extremely helpful and apologetic woman' offered a new box and a £70 credit. This covered Chris' court fees but didn't compensate for his wasted time. 'A customer should not need to issue a summons in order to have Sky address a problem,' Chris told us.



claimed they would leave a brand that treated them poorly. And four in 10 would even be happy to pay more for a brand that delivered better customer service.

When we posted the topic on Which? Conversation, one member told us: 'For me, excellence in customer service [is] a priority over price. Poor customer service gets my blood boiling. Conversely, I am forthcoming in praising those who give outstanding service.'

Our survey respondents seemed to agree, with many quite angry when recounting their experiences. But bad customer service isn't just annoying, stressful and inconvenient. Poor complaints handling can lead to consumers wasting time and ending up out of pocket (see Chris Harper's story, below left).

### WINNING BRANDS

Thankfully, some brands seem to consistently get it right when it comes to making customers feel valued. Lush, Lakeland, First Direct, John Lewis, RAC, Amazon and Waitrose all excel at customer service in our survey. Each of these companies was rated highly for the attitude and helpfulness of its staff and achieved five-star ratings for 'communications' and 'ability to deal with issues', showing that these two areas are of key importance to consumers.

### PROACTIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

Our top brands stand out for their ability to deal with problems quickly and

efficiently. Lakeland, second overall, was commended for exceeding expectations in this area. One respondent praised 'an amazing lifetime guarantee.' Another customer discovered a scratch on a baking tray bought from Lakeland's website. 'When I telephoned to complain, I was advised that a replacement was on its way and that I should donate the faulty item to a charity of my choice – perfect!'

A First Direct customer praised the company for helping after an identity theft, saying, 'I cannot speak highly enough of them.' Another said: 'No problem is too big or small to deal with.' One happy Amazon customer told us: 'I had a problem with a Kindle that was only a couple of months old. It kept freezing and the only way out was to shut it down and reboot. Amazon promptly sent me a new Kindle with instructions on how to reload my books and told me to send the old one back to them in the replacement Kindle's packaging. The whole thing was handled very quickly and efficiently.'

### SUPER STAFF

Customers place great importance on staff being clued up and friendly. Lush stands out as the only brand to receive five stars for staff knowledge and attitude. One Lush customer told us: 'The staff are ridiculously friendly, helpful and amenable. They must put something in the water because I've never seen happier staff working in the retail/service industry.'

'John Lewis is one of the best on the high street for a good customer experience', another respondent said. 'They seem to go out of their way to provide anything you may need and I can't rate them highly enough.' The RAC, fifth in our league table, is also highly commended. 'The RAC has always been polite, friendly and very helpful', reported one happy customer.

### LOW-SCORING BRANDS

Ryanair, Talk Talk, Npower, 99p Stores, TK Maxx, BT and EDF Energy all fail in

## OUR RESEARCH

We surveyed 3,331 members of the UK public online in July 2013 to ask their opinion of some of the biggest brands they'd used in the last year.

Respondents were asked to rate up to three brands on six aspects of

customer service, including if they felt like a valued customer, helpfulness of staff communications, staff knowledge, ability to deal with issues, and availability, as well as giving each an overall score out of 10 for customer service. Our table doesn't show all measures due to space constraints.

**“The Lush staff are ridiculously friendly, helpful and amenable. I’ve never seen happier staff working in the retail/service industry”**

their treatment of customers, according to our survey, but BT, Talk Talk and Ryanair deserve special mention for ‘poor’ two-star ratings in every element of customer service provision.

Many brands that fail to impress are guilty of the ‘sins’ from our Top 10 customer service irritations (see p20).

**LEFT WAITING** As a nation we don’t like long queues, being kept on hold or being ignored – whether in store, on the telephone or when making written queries and complaints. Almost half of customers are irritated by staff carrying on private conversations, often about ‘non-work related issues’. One Which? member told us of his frustration in Morrisons: ‘I’ve been tempted to leave the purchases on the conveyor belt and walk away in disgust.’ Another

customer complained about 99p Stores: ‘The staff were talking to each other rather than concentrating on the task at hand. Several mistakes were made while paying for my purchase due to the lack of concentration.’

Excessive queuing is not popular either, annoying 50% of respondents. An unhappy BT customer posted on Which? Conversation: ‘I was held four times in a queue for more than 30 minutes and told four times that my telephone number would be changed within 48 hours... It’s still the same as it was.’

Another bone of contention, annoying 38% of UK customers, is being made to wait when they needed help or advice.

**LACK OF KNOWLEDGE** Four in 10 consumers are annoyed by encountering ‘unknowledgeable staff’ when they need

help or advice. Several discount brands (see p20) plus Talk Talk, BT, EDF, Royal Bank of Scotland and Matalan get only two stars for staff knowledge.

One respondent despaired following a request to BT for technical support: ‘Support staff did not seem to even have basic technical knowledge. I ended up solving the problem myself.’ And another told us of a Homebase staff member who had ‘no knowledge of where stock was or any decent advice. I was told something was out of stock yet found heaps of the said item in a different aisle’.

#### **POOR PROBLEM SOLVING**

Too often it’s only when something goes wrong that shortcomings in customer service come to light. More than half of UK customers (53%) were annoyed at being passed around different departments. Vodafone, Three, SSE, BT, Talk Talk and Npower – all utility companies – stand out as the non-budget brands getting two stars for their poor ability to resolve issues. >

## CHOOSING A BRAND

Our results show that there are big differences between brands, which could help you choose a particular company if customer service is important to you. Here are the top- and bottom-scoring brands in four key sectors, of those included in our survey, at a glance:



### Airlines

↑ **TOP** British Airways **75%**  
↓ **BOTTOM** Ryanair **54%**

British Airways receives four stars for communications and three stars for other elements of customer service. Ryanair’s customer service skills earn it a ‘poor’ two stars across the board. A budget airline does get a higher customer service score: Easyjet (69%) beats Ryanair on everything except making customers feel valued.



### Banks

↑ **TOP** First Direct **84%**  
↓ **BOTTOM** Royal Bank of Scotland **66%**

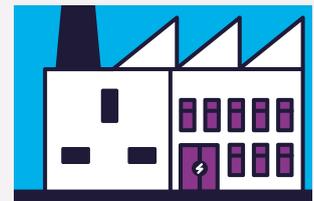
First Direct is clearly a customer-focused bank, coming joint third in our survey and scoring five stars for availability, communications and ability to deal with issues. However, Royal Bank of Scotland only receives a ‘poor’ two-star score for making customers feel valued and for having knowledgeable staff.



### Supermarkets

↑ **TOP** Waitrose **81%**  
↓ **BOTTOM** Lidl **66%**

Waitrose is a top scorer in our customer service survey. Lidl receives only a two-star rating for the knowledge and attitude of staff and making customers feel valued. Lidl’s discount rival, Aldi, receives three stars across the board and gets a higher customer score (73%). It’s also the winner of our 2013 Best Supermarket Award.



### Energy

↑ **TOP** Scottish Power **70%**  
↓ **BOTTOM** Npower **59%**

Scottish Power is the only one of the big six energy companies to make it to the 70% mark. Eon gets 67% but the remaining four all lag behind at the bottom end of our table. NPower disappoints its customers the most (59%) with ‘poor’ two-star scores for staff attitude and for its ability to deal with issues.

**DO YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR?**

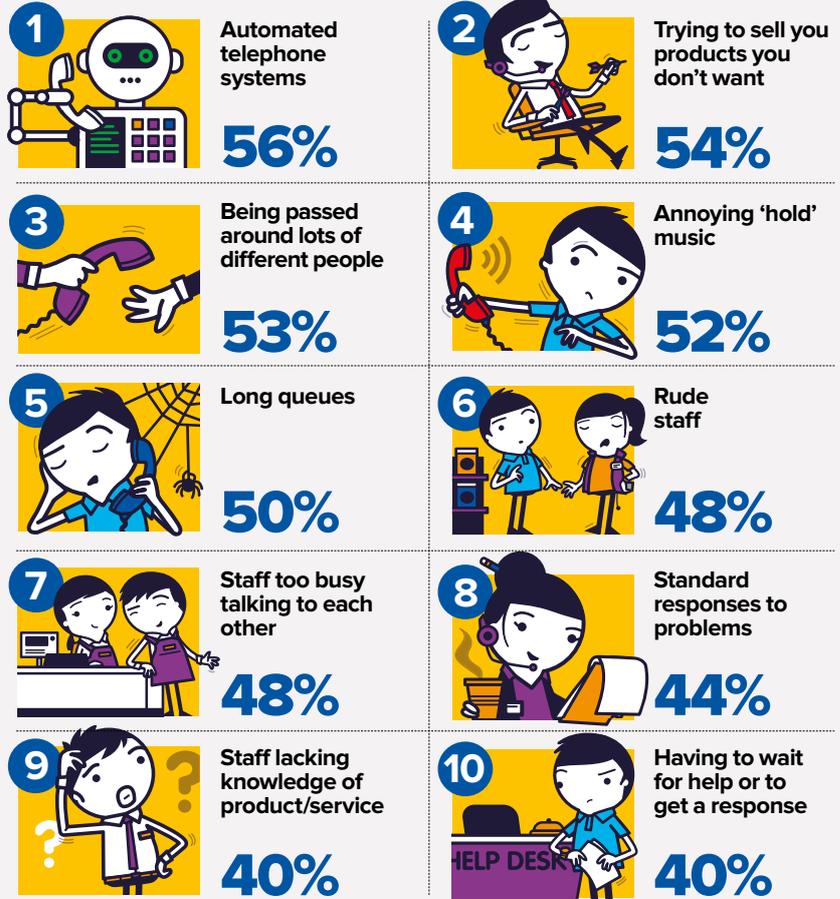
Some of the worst offenders for poor customer service were bargain or discount brands well-known for competing mainly on price, such as Poundstretcher, Poundland, 99p Stores, TK Maxx, Lidl and Ryanair. But basic customer care – paying attention and being polite – isn't expensive, and we believe that there's no excuse for treating customers badly. As one customer told us: 'It doesn't cost anything to smile!'

Customers of bargain stores, such as 99p Stores and Lidl, complained about rude and miserable staff. And a bewildered Poundland shopper, pointing out some milk past its use by date, said he was told by the manager: 'What do you expect? This isn't Harrods!' Respondents weren't without compassion, however. One understanding soul said: 'They have typical overworked, harassed staff who are on breadline wages and mostly can't be bothered. And who can blame them?'

In some cases, customers put up with poor service if the price is right. A shopper said of TK Maxx: 'Staff were surly and not at all welcoming. It's a good job the stock makes it worthwhile going in, otherwise I'd avoid it.' And passengers appear to agree with Ryanair CEO Michael O'Leary's open admission that price is a priority over customer service. One said of his recent travel with Ryanair that he found it: 'aggressive and hostile towards customers. Staff are rude and unpleasant'. Another flyer related their poor in-flight treatment, lamenting 'rude air stewards who make you feel like a nuisance rather than a customer'. Others are unwilling to be treated badly, whatever the savings. 'I now prefer to pay £50 extra for my flights and to be treated like a human being,' concluded one of their experience.

# TOP 10 CUSTOMER SERVICE IRRITATIONS

The following elements of customer service are the most annoying, according to our survey:



## EXPERT VIEW

### Solving service shortfalls

Richard Dilks | Which? policy advisor



As part of our 'Real Customers, Real Service' series we've been investigating what makes an exceptional customer experience.

The poet Maya Angelou wrote: 'while people may forget what you said and did, they always remember how you

made them feel'. That's very true when it comes to customer service. Outstanding service can leave you feeling positive, valued and likely to want to repeat the experience. Terrible customer service can leave you feeling stressed, frustrated, angry and, in many cases, never wanting that experience again.

Here's our advice for companies who want to inspire loyalty in their customers and keep them coming back for more:

**1. Exceptional customer service more than pays for itself.**

Happy customers are loyal customers; loyal customers are profitable customers.

**2. Value your customers and they'll value you.**

Treat each person as an individual. Understand what your customers want and don't waste their time by keeping them waiting and not being able to sort things out first time.

**3. Invest in your staff.**

Your customers are likely to judge your brand by its staff, so investing in recruitment and training will pay dividends in the long term.

**4. A complaint is a gift.**

Senior managers need to listen to feedback from staff and customers and act on it. If things have gone wrong, see that as an opportunity for improvement. Seize the chance to recover the situation, and retain rather than lose customers.

**5. Don't rest on your laurels.**

Respond to changing customer demand. None of the companies that excel in our survey have done so by failing to innovate or improve. Complacency hasn't got them there, nor will it keep them there.