

Jillian Flodstrom (00:00):

Today's episode is not gonna be one you wanna miss, especially if you are confused or even overwhelmed by choosing a CPA. Today we talked to Hector and he goes into all the details about how to choose the right cpa, how his firm has excelled at excellent customer service, but also giving us tips on how to choose a cpa because there's so many confusing things, you wanna make sure that you pick someone that you vibe with, that you can have a long-term relationship with, and keep those lines of communication open and clear. Today's episode is one that you're definitely gonna wanna tune into, if that's something that you're struggling with.

Jillian Flodstrom (00:49):

Hey, we have a guest who's a true expert when it comes to financial affairs and maximizing your tax strategies. He's got over 10 years of experience working in Fortune 200 companies, and his proficiency spans across various industries. He's been a branch manager of a highly profitable painting company, a division controller for one of the nation's largest home builders and a certified public accountant for a local Spokane firm. Not only is he a financial wiz, but he also understands that it's the people that make a business run and that business partners help support them along the way. He's also a proud alum of Washington State University and the University of Washington, where he was involved in growing the mentorship program and has even created a hedge fund account with a network of his peers. I'm thrilled to have him on the show today. Please join me in welcoming Hector Castaneda. How are you?

Hector Castaneda (01:39):

Hey, Jillian. I'm good. Thank you for that intro.

Jillian Flodstrom (01:42):

Yeah, for sure. Well, listen, it's very rare that we get somebody from Washington on the podcast, so I feel like we're neighbors, and I'm so glad that you're here to talk with us today, because I feel like finance, there are murky waters surrounding finance, and we're gonna dive into a bunch of different stuff today that I think our listeners are really gonna find value in. So let's kick it off with what are the key components of customer service as it relates to the financial industry?

Hector Castaneda (02:09):

Yeah, and thank you for that. I, I actually really like the direction of where this is starting, because ultimately, you know, in the service industry, often folks think that accountants are these, you know, suited up, stuffy professionals. But in reality in today's world, what really keeps the business doors open are the customer experiences that you can provide. And so with that, you know, a lot of the attention lately has come to how do you tailor your services to meet the unique and growing complex situations that clients will find themselves in. And so for me specifically that means providing you know, interviews and assessing whether or not there's even a good fit from the onset with a client. And so for me, I, I try to be selective with clients in that I also try to just be transparent and communicate with them that, hey, you know, maybe there's a better fit for you out there, but it's about finding that opportunity within your personalities to say, Hey, you know, this is a very this is a very personal matter. It's a very intimate matter. And so with that I like to just say that my, my first piece of advice to anyone in this industry, whether you're looking for a CPA or whether you're a CPA looking for clients, is understanding what kind of chemistry you might have with, with your audience and deciding to even, even continue that opportunity from, from that foundation. Does that make sense?

Jillian Flodstrom ([04:13](#)):

Absolutely. Well, and I think it's important too, because there's so many people that might be starting a business, and at that point they're just like, I need some people that will pay me to do this service. But the reality of it is, is that's not always the right way to go about it. That you do have to be selective because you are creating a client journey for all these folks that you work with, and you wanna make sure it's one that both of you enjoy. And that relationship is mutual because you're right, talking about money is very sensitive, people are very passionate about it, and you wanna make sure that you have a good relationship with that client that you're working with. What are some steps that you and your team take to provide that high level customer service?

Hector Castaneda ([04:56](#)):

Yeah, so for me, it's, you know, I always start with communication. I, I like to keep my conversations organic to the extent possible. What you'll find about my style is that I don't like to beat around the bush very long, but keep in mind, and, and I like to keep in mind that the truth is in the eyes of the beholder, right? So whether or not I necessarily find something relevant or irrelevant to a conversation, if a client brings it up, you know, it's important to address that issue of theirs specifically. And then how we as a firm can provide any any value to it, and being honest upfront about the extent of the value that you can't provide, right? Ultimately, there are some tools that I try to use, like frameworks and, you know, my, my the way my brain works is I always go back to what's your goal, right?

Hector Castaneda ([06:06](#)):

What are you trying to achieve? Because what you're trying to achieve isn't necessarily what the next person's trying to achieve, right? In your case, I'd say, Jillian, what are you trying to maximize right now? You're trying to maximize your cash flow, your tax savings. You know, do we want to strategically place certain things into service this year? Do we want to take certain reductions this year? Can we do it next year? How much money are you making this year? How much do you project you're gonna make next year? All of those things are considered on a case by case basis, and then we tailor our services to address that specific strategy. And, you know, it may not even be tax related at all. Sometimes I find that people are just trying to get a sense of their books, right? They don't even know where to start.

Hector Castaneda ([06:57](#)):

And so even just playing that kind of mentor role for a second, if you will it, it's just so incredibly valuable that you, you're able to put yourself in their shoes and sympathize, right? And, you know, there are some books that I've read that I'd say I would recommend, and, you know, those are, those deal with personality. I guess understanding personalities, I'd say I'd spend more time reading books about personalities than I do taxes. So all that to say that's how we try to tailor our services to provide better client experiences overall. And it's just focusing on the person first, hearing them out, and then based off of that, let the conversation flow. Seeing where we can provide the most value. And then being upfront, again, communicating early with, Hey, we know this about this, but we may not know much about this industry. Right? and people really respect that. People really seem to appreciate the honesty, and more often than not, even if you don't know anything about that specific industry, if they like who you are and they value your personality, they value your conversation, then they'll still move forward with you. Does that make sense?

Jillian Flodstrom ([08:25](#)):

Absolutely. And I think keeping those lines of communication clear, indie industry is so important, but more so in yours because we are talking about super private things or maybe things that we're not super familiar with. Like, we might not know that much about farming because we didn't grow up like that, but being able to support a client through the tax strategies of that is so huge. So keeping those lines of communication open key in any business, what are some methods that you use to gather customer feedback, which ultimately helps you improve the service that you provide to your clients?

Hector Castaneda ([08:59](#)):

Yeah, that's a great question. So, you know that there are many, there are many answers to this question, but to me, you can always start with just a feedback loop, right? A survey, for example. But how meaningful are the surveys, really? And I wanna get a little theoretical with you, but think about it for a second, right? Are people really going to that extent to provide you what they would do if they were in your shoes? Not necessarily, right? They don't get paid to do that. They're really just giving you some sort of feedback. And some people just do it kind of mindlessly. I had a good buddy of mine, for example, who put that in the latest survey that I gave them, that bilingual fluency was one of the most important features that we offered, but he doesn't speak like the Spanish, so I know he was kidding around.

Hector Castaneda ([09:56](#)):

So my point is, when you compile all these feedback surveys, what are they really telling you, right? Are some of 'em just kind of a little dishonest? Are some of them a little too harsh? Are some of them not telling you enough? Right? And so for me, it's a, the, the biggest feedback, or what I value the most is the true organic conversations we have on a day-to-day basis, right? I understand that every purchase, every purchase we make is emotional, even taxes, right? When people pay you, when people pay you, not just in money, but in time, right? How much they're investing in their true emotions, that there is how much value you're providing to them, right? If someone comes to you and asks you for advice, in my opinion, genuinely asks you for advice, I feel honored, right? And I feel like, hey, that's a, that's good feedback for me.

Hector Castaneda ([10:59](#)):

I rely so much more on that feedback than I do on my surveys. Now that said, you do want to collect those surveys, right? You do wanna get a sense of, Hey, consistently, what am I seeing? Is there a pattern here? And then trying to tailor our services to that specific item. But in short, to me, the, the true feedback comes from just the day-to-day conversations that we have. And I always love hearing genuine, constructive criticism. When, when I, when I've learned to really thrive in that I've learned to interpret a complaint as a gift, right? People are going out of their way to tell you, Hey, this is something I've had with you, right? And that takes that, that takes some courage. It's like raising your hand in a classroom. That's tough to do. That's a conversation most people don't like to have. And so when you have that conversation, that is honestly a gift. And so I try to reciprocate with that sort of feedback or that sort of emotion myself, like, thank you, that's great. Let's work on that. Does that make sense?

Jillian Flodstrom ([12:18](#)):

Absolutely. Well, and I really like the model that you have of, we are constantly testing things, but we're tweaking them as we go through this process. Some things might work now, but a year or two from now, they might not work. So we have to adjust them. And one thing that I really love is technology. Like I love it. I'm a gadget girl. Like, there are so many different things that we use in my business for technology.

Tell me about the technology that you use in your business. How does that propel your customer service even farther?

Hector Castaneda ([12:48](#)):

Yeah, and that's a great question because in today's day and age, there are not just cool gadgets to be aware of, but also gadgets that you have to have that are non-negotiable for security reasons, especially in an industry like mine, right? We're dealing with very sensitive information. You're also dealing with very time sensitive and urgent information. And so say that you have any I guess, setups that are very hardwired into your laptop, right? And if it breaks, if all of a sudden, well, you're out of your, your doors are closed, you're out of commission for a while, so you need to have certain softwares that can back up your information where you can access it in different locations, right? Likewise, you need to have those interfaces with those customers that are simple and easy to use and efficient. And so specifically some of the the softwares I'm using are Suite Dash.

Hector Castaneda ([13:47](#)):

I really like them. They're kind of a, you know, under the radar company, and they've been very great about providing customer service. And I really like the way that we operate our business. I value that, right? I don't necessarily care if there are certain downfalls with say like lag time because there are times that, you know, I've provided that feedback to them and said, Hey, there's a lot of lag in these certain areas. But you know what? Your customer service, the way that your principles are aligned with mine are so important that I, I will be a diehard fan until I can be right until maybe my, my business scales outside of the limitations that can be provided by that. Another thing I use is, unfortunately, in, in my world, I, I have to have many, many softwares because I'm dealing with so many different businesses.

Hector Castaneda ([14:46](#)):

So it's kind of hard to give a specific shout out to, you know, best practices on one specific system or not, but say, like QuickBooks, right? That's just a default. You have to tailor your business around what your client's needs are. And if that's providing these different plugins, you know, if I were to say, Hey what's a good you know good vision or representation of how my business is set up, think about like a re tech or a computer pc repair station. I just have plugins for almost anything, right? And so whatever software you're using, I'm gonna figure out a way to plug it into another software that I have that all links up to my specific core enterprise resource system. Does that make, does that make sense?

Jillian Flodstrom ([15:39](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. And really like meeting clients where they are. And I'm glad that you brought that up because not only do we have our external customers that we're focused on, we wanna provide a great client journey and a client experience to them, but also we have our internal customers, which are our employees. So how do you work with your employees to provide that consistent and reliable customer service across multiple different industries and multiple different clients?

Hector Castaneda ([16:07](#)):

Yeah, that's a fantastic question. Also, the, the tricky the trickiest element in any business, I believe, is first understanding the, the chemistry between your assets, your biggest assets, which are your people and your external customers who you service. And so to me, it, it's so much more about coaching and ensuring that there's good sense of motivation within my team before I really start to give them necessarily or tailor to, you know, any softwares or any external systems or tools that might, might make

things easier, right? The, the bigger picture element here is addressing, Hey, let's talk about how you feel about these sorts of tasks, right? What do you manage? Well, what do you not manage? Well, let's be honest about that, right? And it starts from the top, right? I myself tell my team, look, I'm not necessarily good at this, but hey, Maria's way better at following up on things.

Hector Castaneda ([17:22](#)):

She's a lot more analytical in the details. She's maybe a little more efficient at communicating, you know, maybe those aren't my strong suits, maybe my strong suits are bigger picture, understanding where the direction, the vision of the company's going. And just knowing those limitations. Once you can figure out where your limitations and where your strengths and where your weaknesses are, then you can start incorporating the tools that are out there to help make that process more efficient. And so, in short, I like to make sure that my team always knows that there's an open door policy, right? And that if there's ever anything that they get stuck in, they know I'm going to come to bat for them. And so, just always being there for your team is probably the number one most crucial thing, just letting them genuinely know, Hey, no matter what, I'm in this until the end.

Hector Castaneda ([18:18](#)):

Does that make sense? And once you can instill that sort of confidence with your team, then really the sky's the limit, right? They will do anything for you. And so, as I said, I, I love dealing with people. It's my favorite element in the business. And, you know, the accounting is really just the vehicle of being able to work with the team and having that kind of mentality that this is really just a team. I just want a community. I want to help. How can I do that? Well, how about an accounting business, right? The accounting business is the vehicle to do that

Jillian Flodstrom ([18:55](#)):

Well, and being able to focus on the strengths of each of your employees. Because so many times we as business owners get bogged down in the day-to-day. And being able to reach out to each person to know their strengths and to know which clients to be able to partner them with is huge. Now, if somebody is looking for, either they have a CPA and they need a new one because the current relationship isn't working, or let's say they've never had a p, they don't even know if they need a c p a. Mm-Hmm. What are some questions that they could ask as they interview people and go through this process?

Hector Castaneda ([19:30](#)):

Yeah, so my biggest advice is understanding where your limitations are right? Before you go out and start seeking a cpa. Think about how much time do you want to invest in the books, right? How much do you wanna keep in house? And that's really one of my first questions to any of my clients. Which time are you investing? How much time do you want to invest? What do you have the capacity for cost, efficiency wise, better to keep things indoors, better to keep things in-house, however, do you know how much how much value you're foregoing if you keep it in-house, right? And so drawing that balance is, is very, very challenging. It's very involved, which is why you'll find that a lot of accountants or CPAs first have like a diagnostic phase, right? They'll first kind of explore everything and then they'll tell you, okay, well, you know, based off of this, this is what I expect.

Hector Castaneda ([20:34](#)):

This is what I would recommend, this is what I would do if I were in your shoes. And so just kind of knowing that process that they're going to go through that investigative period, I would kind of try to do

that on your own and say, okay, what do I know? Okay, what do I not know? And then saying, okay, when I show up to a new cpa, or if I'm dealing with a CPA right now, what are they doing for me? What kind of services are they providing me on, say, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annual basis, right? And so understanding that at the end of the day, how much time are you going to save outsourcing that, or even how much more time is it going to involve if you insource that, right? Having that sort of mentality is probably the most the number one step I would take if I were in anyone's shoes.

Hector Castaneda ([21:32](#)):

The other added element to that is new ground, right? Sometimes you just need a second opinion. It's a common misconception that, hey, if it's working for Washington State, I bet it works right over the, the border over to Idaho. And people would be greatly mistaken to know that, hey, different states operate in different ways and the federal government operates, it's in its own way, right? So even if it's just new unfamiliar ground, I would maybe start with a quick 20, 30 minute, minute call with professional in that area, someone who understands that, and just getting some feedback and saying, what do I know? What do I not know? And then deciding from there if it makes sense from your, your business at that point.

Jillian Flodstrom ([22:22](#)):

Well, now you've given us some really helpful links, and I've located those in the show notes. So for anybody, whether you're driving or running, those links will be in the show notes for you for quick access. But where can people connect with you? Do you have a favorite social media channel?

Hector Castaneda ([22:37](#)):

So, yeah, I, I usually and rather responsive when it comes to Facebook. We do have a Facebook page, Castaneta, CPA, and Associates. We also have a LinkedIn. We also have Instagram. But what you'll find is that most professionals live in a dungeon until about four 15. And that's because of the tax deadline. And so you can always go to my website and book a virtual meeting. Okay. That is a very tailored, personalized meeting, and it gives you access to my calendar live. So if it's available, that means I'm available for our call. So I do tend to block things out whether or not I have meetings, but that means I'm working on other clients' deadlines. So that would be my preferred method until four 15. And then on four 15, I may become a little quicker to respond, come the socials.

Jillian Flodstrom ([23:35](#)):

That's great. Well, thank you again so much for spending time with us. I really appreciate it. I know that people have found great value in this episode because when we talk about finance, we get amazing feedback. So thanks again for spending time with us.

Hector Castaneda ([23:49](#)):

Yeah, great to be on the show. Thank you, Jillian. I appreciate your time.