



What are best practices for noting gender in customer accounts?

An Ask E Source answer

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Q: What are best practices for noting gender in utility customer accounts?

A: Contact center representatives (CSRs) can incorrectly assume a customer's gender based on their voice, resulting in discomfort for your customers. We recommend creating gender-inclusivity policies at your utility and training your CSRs to avoid assuming a customer's gender identity or pronouns.

Identity and fraud verification

Avoid gendered language and honorifics. Stonewall, an LGBTQ+ charity in the UK, has many resources to help companies provide respectful and discrimination-free service to customers, including free publications about frontline service delivery. Its report [Getting it Right with Your Trans Service Users and Customers](#) (PDF) provides helpful guidance for transgender-inclusive service delivery.

The resource also includes direct customer quotes highlighting the challenges transgender individuals often face when trying to receive important services. This is especially the case when they feel like they have to go to great lengths to verify their identity:

Generally speaking I have had a positive experience of services, however as a transgender woman with a deep voice, phone based services can at times be problematic.

It is not uncommon for me to be misgendered by service providers such as my bank, phone company, airlines etc. For the most part I understand where the confusion comes from, and a quick explanation from me that I am transgender is usually sufficient to allow us to move on. However there have been incidences where my bank has refused to believe that I was myself and forced me to go through lengthy additional security questions in order to prove my identity. As much as I try to remain pragmatic, it does dent my confidence and it can be wearing to be constantly reminded that the world doesn't always see me as the woman I am. It would be nice if phone-based service providers could deliver a simple piece of training to instruct operators not to base identity by their expectations of someone's voice.

—Hannah

To better serve customers like Hannah, CSRs shouldn't assume gender based on a customer's voice. Instead, train staff to use gender-neutral language and refer to the customer by their first name and avoid using gendered pronouns or other honorifics. If a customer prefers an honorific, your CSRs can note this in the customer's profile.

Consider whether your need to collect information about gender. Stonewall also advises considering whether your organization needs to collect information about a customer's gender. Because gender isn't integral to providing customers with utility-offered services, consider using alternate ways to check for fraud beyond matching customer voice to the gender on file.

If you decide gender identity is a necessary piece of information to include in customer accounts, provide gender-neutral options and allow customers to self-identify with an open-ended option. It's also important to allow customers to designate their title.

For example, financial services company HSBC now uses open-ended honorifics. According to the Reuters article [Mr, Mrs, Mx or Misc? Banking giant HSBC introduces gender neutral titles](#), customers can choose from 10 gender-neutral titles when registering for an account. These include:

- Mx.
- M.
- Mre.
- Msr.
- Myr.
- Ind.
- Pr.
- Sai.

- Ser.
- Misc.

The honorifics appear on bank cards and in communications from the company. Existing customers can also change their titles online.

When updating options for honorifics, make sure employees who communicate with customers know how to pronounce the options.

Allow customers to use documents besides a birth certificate. Stonewall notes that “many trans people do not want to or cannot change their legal gender. Requiring them to supply a birth certificate may present a barrier to them accessing your service or product.”

If identification is necessary for service, utilities should allow a variety of identification options such as a driver’s license or passport.

Name changes

Stonewall provides the following guidance for addressing name changes (for instance, if a customer calls to change their name after transitioning). Note that legal implications below refer to UK laws.

Customers and service users should have the ability to change details about their name or gender on your systems at any time in order for them to contain correct and up-to-date information. Members of staff who use these systems should be made aware of this and be trained to do so sensitively and without asking unnecessary or personal questions. People should be able to change their information efficiently and sensitively.

Staff who deal with these changes should be informed that:

- A person does not need to hold a gender recognition certificate in order to change this information (it is also a criminal offence to disclose someone’s gender history if they hold a gender recognition certificate)
- A person wishing to change this information should be treated with respect like any other customer updating their details
- A person wishing to change this information may feel hesitant in changing it, so customer service and sensitivity is of the upmost [sic] importance when carrying out the process
- Customer service staff should not ask personal questions during the process and remember their professional role in the transaction

The UK Equalities Office also released guidance on trans-inclusive service in its report [Providing services for transgender customers](#) (PDF), which directly addresses name changes:

A transgender person may wish to be referred to by a different name and pronoun and require their gender marker to be changed on documents and systems.

The vast majority of documentation can and should be changed upon request as it simply enables you to identify a particular individual within your setting and has no other ramifications. In many instances it is not even necessary to see a formal name change document.

Gender-inclusivity practices

Stonewall encourages organizations to evaluate the training needs of their staff and identify any areas of service that may negatively affect customers. Your training for frontline staff can then address these needs and help you better serve your LGBTQ+ customers.

The key areas Stonewall recommends including in trainings are:

- *Organizational policy and relevant legislation.* This includes your organization's values of the service, staff expectations, and legal obligations.
- *The needs of your LGBTQ+ customers.* This includes details about barriers and inequalities in your specific services, data trends, and customer feedback.
- *Sector context.* This includes relevant research and guidelines relating to LGBTQ+ customers in your service territory.
- *Terminology, stereotypes, and assumptions.* This includes appropriate and inappropriate language to use when talking about LGBTQ+ identities.
- *Internal and external services.* This includes information on when and how to refer customers to offerings specific to the LGBTQ+ community.
- *Challenging inappropriate behavior.* This includes addressing the behavior from customer to customer, staff member to customer, or customer to staff member.
- *Reporting procedures.* This includes instructions on how to formally report homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic bullying and harassment.