

Dealing with Difficult Customers

Responding to angry, disgruntled and frustrated customers can be very stressful, especially over the phone. However, I strongly believe that this is precisely the time when businesses have a golden opportunity to shine.

Think of it this way? it's easy to be polite and upbeat when things are going great? but way too many business owners underestimate the value of training their employees in the fine art of dealing with difficult customers; demonstrating the "right way" and tolerating nothing less.

Sidebar: Before I continue, some words of caution? Employees are much more willing, and able, to arrive at positive solutions for unhappy customers if they are armed with the tools necessary to make this happen? the most important being, empowerment.

If you cripple your employees' ability to "turn lemons into lemonade" I've consulted with many companies that cripple their employees by severely restricting their ability to "make good".

They erroneously claim that they will "give away the farm" (the old, "give 'em an inch and they'll take a mile" syndrome.) without ever considering the amount of money they're losing on lost customers; rotten word of mouth; excessive employee turnover; wasted phone time, stress, etc.

I cringe every time I hear this! If you don't believe me, go to your nearest bookstore and buy a copy of "The Nordstrom Way" (Spector and McCarthy) and see if reading that changes your mind!

One of the unexpected pleasures you and your employees will derive from really, really pleasing a miserable customer is the joy it brings! No, this is not "touchy-feely-warm-and-fuzzy-psychobabble" ? just try it and you'll see.

Remember, no matter what "business" you're in ? whether you're a doctor, lawyer, retailer, non-profit organization, wholesaler, consultant, etc. you are there to serve? As one of my mentors, Zig Ziegler, said best, "The more you help other people get what they want, the more you'll get what you want.?"

So, be grateful to that irate customer who snaps you awake, and presents you with an intriguing psychological challenge and often winds up becoming your most loyal customer!

Tips for Dealing with "Distressed" Customers

1.No matter how angry or unreasonable your customer is, your ultimate three goals are to:

- * Calm them down
- * Communicate your understanding of their problem, empathize, fix it and
- * Hear a hearty "thank you!" when it's over

2. Making it Happen

- * Smile (as you answer the phone (yes, people can really tell) or greet the customer in person
- * Introduce yourself enthusiastically ? For example, "Hi,my name is John? we're glad you called the XXX Company today! How can I help you??"
- * Once they've told you the reason for their call, it's important to:
 - Let them know that you will personally handle their complaint - Apologize and acknowledge their feelings - Sympathize and draw them out - Prepare to help, ask questions, and convey personalcaring - Keep the volume of your voice normal, not loud - Slow your speech down a bit and lower your pitch

These techniques will have immediate calming effects and place you in control of the conversation in a non-threatening way. Note their name - then use it! It's the sweetest word(s) in any language? but make sure you ask the proper pronunciation if you're not sure! Also: * Give them your undivided attention: They're already unhappy, so don't make it worse by making them feel that you're not really there? ? e.g. don't look around ? keep your eyes focused on them; no rustling papers; answering other calls; etc.

* Listen carefully and take notes: The vast majority of customer complaints are legitimate? so this should always be your first assumption. Write important information down to ensure accuracy; help you get to the bottom of the problem; avoid making the customer repeat themselves and make it easier for you to relate the situation to someone else if needed.

* Echo key points: This will go a long way in reassuring the customers and make certain that you understand the ?heart? of their complaint? ?ask the question behind the question.? * Provide a resolution: A great question to ask is: ?How can I best resolve this for you?

* Lead them to a solution: Remember, if you're contact personnel are not empowered offer a solution the process make break down here

*Thank them for calling or visiting: Also, apologize for any inconvenience they've experienced and let them know that you work hard every day to ensure that every customer experience is delightful, and you will continue to do so.

* Update their customer account to reflect your conversation and resolution: This ensures that other employees can get up to speed, if needed. Additionally, make sure that you follow-up with anyone else involved in the ?fix? within 24 hours!

3. Put Stress in Prospective

Unhappy customers can cause stress but it's important to remember that their anger is not personal. They are annoyed at a problem, not you. Sometimes they just need to vent. If you suspect this, it's often a good idea to let them go on a bit.

4. Helpful Phrases to Use

* How can I help you?

* Thanks so much for your patience and cooperation

* Sir, could you please explain the situation so I help you resolve this?

* I'm so sorry to hear that? I don't blame you for being frustrated. I believe I would as well?

* Let's work together to resolve this, shall we?

* I can see why you feel that way?

* I see what you mean?

* That must be upsetting?

* I understand how frustrating this must be for you and I really appreciate your patience?

5. Phrases to Avoid at All Costs

* Our policy is?

* Calm down!

* What's your problem?

* That's not our fault!

- * I can't help it if my employee was rude?
 - * I'm not going to repeat this again?
 - * Listen to me?
 - * I can't?
 - * Why don't you be reasonable?
 - * There's nothing else I can do?
6. Ways to Remain Cool
- * Tell yourself it's futile to allow another person to ruin your day, then don't let that happen.
 - * Remind yourself that you're a professional and know how to deal with this situation in that manner.
 - * If you want to solve the problem quickly, don't throw fuel on the fire?
 - * Understand how good you'll feel when you look back with pride on how you handled a difficult

7. How to Deal with Anger

There are a few customers use "bullying" as a means to intimidate others personally and professionally. Whatever their reasons for "being mad at the world," they may take advantage of any excuse to "get back". This type of interaction, although rare, presents added challenges but if you know how to deal with them correctly, your stress will be greatly diminished.

No person should have to tolerate behavior that crosses certain boundaries. Abusive language can be dealt with immediately with a firm, "Mr./Ms. Smith, excuse me, I want to help you, but I cannot permit you to use unprofessional language." Nearly always, this results in an apology.

Using the customer's name and, if appropriate, formal title improves the chances of this working. If not, this person must be handed off; put on hold; or terminated with a statement such as, "I'm sorry, this cannot continue." Period.

Any incident that goes this far, harassing, and/or threats of violence should be reported to other employees or supervisors and/or the proper authorities.

Bottom Line: Your most loyal customers are not the ones who have never experienced a problem with your company? Rather they're the customers whose problems were solved the right way!

Short note about the author

Mary Eule specializes in helping small and medium-sized businesses get and keep profitable customers. Formerly a Fortune 500 marketing executive; founder of two successful small businesses and award-winning speaker, Ms. Eule is President of Strategic Marketing Advisors, LLC. and co-author of a new book, "Mandatory Marketing: Small Business Edition". She has a BA in Journalism/English from the University of Maryland and earned her a master's degree in marketing from Johns Hopkins University. Log onto her website:

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