



Resolving Customer Conflicts

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There is no doubt about it, working with customers can be very stressful. Even the most patient and polite customers can sometimes be frustrating when we don't have the capacity (time, energy, ability, resources, etc.) to easily meet their expectations or requests. We KNOW it isn't their fault (don't we?) yet still can't help ourselves from feeling a little put upon.

And of course when we're faced with real customer conflict – with raised voices, red faces and high blood pressure – it's easy to get carried away with emotions of anger, resentment and sometimes even fear. So it's not surprising that many customer service employees have difficulty handling such a situation professionally and productively.

If you're faced with an upset customer and you're having difficulty resolving the conflict in a mutually satisfactory way, try one or more of these strategies to turn your difficult conflict into a win/win customer collaboration.

Validate the Customer's Perspective.

This doesn't mean that you necessarily agree with the customer's opinion or perception of events, and it doesn't obligate you to share their stated interests. But before expecting a customer to understand and appreciate YOUR situation, they need to know that you understand and appreciate THEIRS.

One of the half-truths about hostile customers is that they want their problem solved. This isn't the whole story. When a person is initially denied something from an organization, they get to a point where the problem becomes secondary. Yes, they want the problem solved, but after a point, they get so angry that they are unwilling to work positively to get what they started out wanting. Even if you could work something out with them, they would still be angry.

It is important to realize that very angry people want an opportunity to vent their anger, and they want to be heard and acknowledged. If you don't acknowledge their anger, and move too quickly to try to solve the problem, you will likely make them angrier and more abusive.

You can let the customer know that you appreciate their perspective with phrases like “If I were in your shoes I’d probably feel the same way” or “I really understand your frustration, and I think your point of view is reasonable.” Again, this doesn’t necessarily mean that you agree with them. After acknowledge their perspective you can then try to help them see the situation from your point of view with a phrase like “There’s probably some additional information you should consider though” or “I hope that you can also see things from my point of view.”

Your ultimate goal is to make certain that, at the very least, the customer knows that their issue or problem has been understood clearly. The next step, resolving the issue to their satisfaction, will probably require you to get more information.

If your establishment is faced with dealing with an unruly customer, try to maintain a clear mental difference between you and your role. Keep in mind that the complaint isn’t made against you personally, but rather against the policy, the product, or the service the customer has received. If you make the issue a personal one, you will become emotionally involved, and that’s not productive.

The first thing to remember about angry customers is that while their behaviour is directed at you (and it can be personally insulting), the real source of the anger is elsewhere. The angry person is not usually angry at you as a person. He or she is usually angry at you as an employee of an organization that is perceived as cold, unfeeling, and unhelpful. Since it is difficult to yell or abuse an entire organization, the angry customer will direct anger towards you.

Try to remain calm. If you continue to maintain a reasonable demeanor and a relatively quiet tone, an argumentative person will sometimes tone down to meet you. People tend to modulate their tone in kind.

Remember just because the customer is upset, doesn't mean he is wrong. It can sometimes be a challenge to wade through the emotional message and get to the basic issues. Until you've found the core of the problem, you can't resolve it. Consider taking loud or verbally abusive customers into an office or other enclosure that offers privacy where he or she can vent without disturbing other customers or employees. Once the customer is calm, then decide what can be done about the problem.

It doesn't hurt to agree a little. When you ease a complainant by saying, “I understand,” or “If that had happened to me, I'd be upset too,” or even simply “What can I do to help?”, you are not necessarily agreeing with their position, only with their right to be angry -- if the story is the way they say it is.

Throw the ball in the customer's court. Ask them what they think can be done to resolve the problem. Your willingness to listen to what they want will make you appear cooperative and helpful, even if you can't meet their expectations. While you're discussing a possible resolution, remember, not to make promises you aren't prepared to keep. Nothing makes for a worse complaint than not delivering on a promise designed to resolve a complaint. You can spend hours rebuilding a customer's trust, then lose the effort by not returning a phone call or not having a delivery truck show up on time.

Don't make commitments for other people's time unless you are absolutely sure they can meet your schedule. And if you have to break a promise, let the customer know as soon as possible. Be prepared to offer an alternative that will still resolve the problem.

To avoid confusion, have a clear understanding of what you've agreed upon with the customer. Reviewing the conversation gives both of you a chance to correct any misunderstanding and understand what the other expects.

There are specific things you can do to take control of potential hostile situations so that they don't escalate into major time-consuming conflicts.

- Speak in a friendly manner. Do not speak in a monotone or in a way that implies that you are uninterested.
- When possible use the customer's name as soon as possible, and also introduce yourself if that fits the situation.
- Greet the person properly. Don't look up from your paper work and say "Yes?", or "Next". That makes you look like part of a machine. Try "Good morning, Mr. Smith".
- Listen carefully. Show the customer you are listening by paraphrasing what was said back to the customer. This shows your interest and concern. A common error made by people is that they don't allow the customer to finish.
- Don't use the "P" word. The P word is "POLICY". Many times an employee will explain that it is against "our policy to do" what the client wants. This infuriates many people. Even if the request is against your policy, find other words to say it. Rather than simply quoting policy, explain the purpose of the policy (eg. "Sir, we need to make sure that you are dealt with fairly and others are too.")
- Never say "I only work here" or "I'm only following rules". Again this makes you into a non-person. It may be true that you don't make the rules, but try saying it this way: "Sir, the regulations are made by [whoever]. Perhaps you might want to talk to [so and so] and indicate that you feel the regulations are unfair. Would you like the phone number?" an active listener then most of the time your mouth should be closed.