

Handling Challenging Customers

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Dealing with Difficult Customers

With some customer service problems, your customer may remain calm and reasonable no matter how upset they might actually be. In other situations, no matter how trivial the problem, your customer may be very difficult, demanding, angry, rude, and even potentially violent. Short of hanging up or calling security, there are certain fundamental yet important steps you can take to deal with difficult customers.

One of the first steps to take when dealing with a challenging customer is to protect yourself with the proper mindset and attitude. Just because your customer is agitated or angry does not mean you need to absorb it or respond in kind. Studies show that just a few minutes of a strong negative emotion such as anger can demolish your body's immune system for many hours afterward. Remember you can't always control how a customer reacts to a given problem, but you can control how you respond. Rather than escalate an unpleasant situation, you can try some tactics to defuse it. You can do this by remaining focused, alert, understanding, caring, unemotional, and—most of all—patient.

Defusing Customer Misbehavior

Earlier in the course we considered just what it is a customer wants. The answer applies to upset customers just as much as any other: they want to be treated with respect and polite, helpful service. There is an ancient adage that a gentle word turns away wrath, and that's as true today. A rude, angry, or belligerent customer may be calmed with a simple, "I'm sorry this has upset you ... let's see how we can fix it."

It's when dealing with difficult customers that your communication skills will be put to the highest test. It may be best to let your customer vent a little before you come back with a response. Remember to speak slowly, use short sentences, be tactful, and follow the golden model of customer service: *listen*, *empathize*, and *take charge*.

It helps to use a customer-centric perspective that puts you in the place of your customer. Try to see the situation as they do. What exactly is causing them stress? What are the solutions they might find satisfactory? How can those solutions be applied with minimum effort by your customer?

You should also employ tactics of effective listening. This helps your customers feel their message is coming through, and you understand their problem clearly. The first step is to smile, to show that you are a friendly ally on their side to fix it. Smile even if you are on the phone—that gesture may sound in your voice. Do not interrupt while your customer is explaining a problem, other than to help clarify an issue. If it's in person, lean towards your customers and turn an ear their way to show you are intently listening. Especially if it's a conversation on the telephone, be sure to use affirmative words and sounds such as *uh-huh*, *yes*, *I see*, to demonstrate that you are listening, and to encourage your customer to continue.

Customer Service Do's and Don'ts

Before we get into some best tips on what to do when dealing with difficult customers, let's start by considering some important things *not* to do. As mentioned earlier, be sure not to get angry yourself, even if the customer starts to attack you personally as *uncaring* or *incompetent*. The reason you have been placed in your position is because you have demonstrated a concern for customer service and the skills to perform your job well. The customer is responding with a perspective muddled by emotion, and you should keep that in mind.

You should also avoid telling your customer to calm down. That may make you appear adversarial to agitated customers, rather than as a helper trying to understand how they feel. Likewise, don't feel a need to defend yourself. This can also create an adversarial relation. Rather, try to assure your customers you hear their concern, and you sincerely want to help.

Try not to interrupt your customers, especially while they're venting some of their anger. Once they have raged for a bit, they may be easier to reason with if you simply acknowledge their anger, and let them share some of it with you.

That said, let's summarize a roster of best tips to settle an upset customer, including a review of some points we may have considered earlier:

- Show empathy for the customers' problems. Let the customers know their problems concern you as well (without letting it actually upset you, of course). Remember to use the magic words, "I'm sorry."
- Encourage an extremely agitated customer to vent a little before taking on the steps to resolving the problem. You can use such phrases as "tell me about what happened."
- Don't take a customer's anger or insults personally. Instead show you are on the customer's side. You might say something like, "I can understand why you're upset."

- Remain objective and calm. Take responsibility and keep a focus on achieving results. Assure the customer, “I’m sure we can fix this.”
- Involve the customer. This returns a sense of empowerment to a customer who may be feeling powerless. Ask, “How would you like to see this resolved?”
- Provide clear options and steps to a resolution. Say, “Here is what we are going to do.”
- Exceed a customer’s expectations. Let the customer know, “... and here is what else we have for you.”
- Finally, assure the customer that the problem will be brought to the attention of management, to ensure a similar situation may be avoided in the future.

If you can apply these simple tips, you may be able to handle most of the difficult customer interactions that come your way. And of course, the final best tip, is when in need, call for help! Your supervisor and coworkers will be quick to come to your aid. Someday it may be one of them that will need the help of your service skills and cool head.

Summary:

- An attitude of calm detachment can help you deal with difficult customers.
- An upset customer can best be defused with a little empathy and an apology.
- When dealing with angry customers, employ active listening skills, and assure them you're on their side.
- Don't get caught up in a customer's personal attacks.
- Turn the interaction to a focus on fixing an issue, empowering the customer to help seek suitable solutions.
- Exceed the customer's expectations.