

Handling Challenging Customers

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Dealing with Difficult Customers

With some customer service problems, your customer might remain calm and reasonable no matter how upset they might actually be. In other situations, no matter how trivial the problem, your customer will be 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 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 cannot 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: treat them 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 might be calmed with a simple, "I'm sorry this has upset you ... let's see how we can fix it."

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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 you apply those solutions with minimum effort?

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 you are a friendly ally sent to fix the problem. Smile even if you are on the phone—that gesture might come through 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 toward 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 discuss best tips on what to do when dealing with difficult customers, let's first consider 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*. Your employer hired you because you have demonstrated both an

aptitude for customer service and the skills to perform your job well. The customer is responding with a perspective muddled by emotion, and you must 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 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 initiating steps to resolve 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 you will advise management of the problem to prevent a similar situation in the future.

If you can apply these simple tips, you might be able to handle most of the difficult customer interactions that come your way. And, the final best tip: when in need, call for

help! Your supervisor and coworkers will be quick to come to your aid. Someday, they may call on you for your service skills and cool head.

Summary:

- An attitude of calm detachment can help you deal with difficult customers.
- A little empathy and an apology are often the best tools to defuse an upset customer.
- 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.