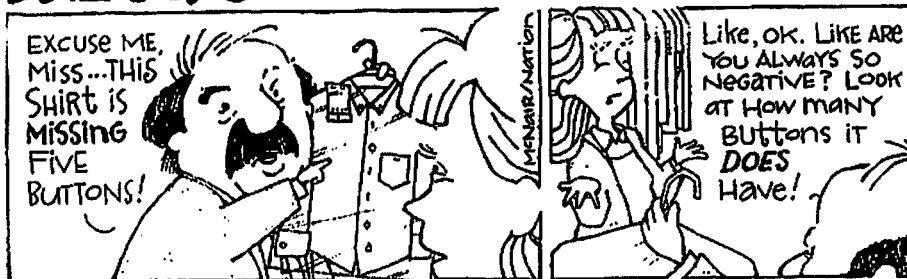


Customer Right-ousness: Dealing with the Challenging Ones

How many times have you heard the phrase “the customer is always right”? Whoever said that never had to deal with customers! Many times the customer is not right (or at least not correct). Chances are they were unaware of or misunderstood a policy, didn’t realize that half of the shift called in sick or that the computer system was down, or overlooked any number of operational problems that haunt businesses every day. Perhaps a more accurate statement might be, “the customer is always the customer.” You see, the customer always *thinks* he or she is right, and that is all that matters in the customer service business. If we want to keep customers coming back, we must treat that perception as reality.

BULLseye



The fact of the matter is that most customers are great. They are friendly, understanding, and tolerant. They are also knowledgeable, demanding, conscious of the value of their time, and hold high expectations for quality of product and service. You as service providers should never take these customers for granted. They are the ones who make your jobs rich, rewarding, and, hopefully, profitable. On the other hand, if you didn't have some tough, challenging customers to deal with, wouldn't life be a little bit boring? OK, maybe that's a stretch. Like it or not, however, you need to be prepared for the inevitable. Even when customers are wrong, you must respect their perception and treat them with respect.

Before we give you some tips on dealing with your challenging customers, you need to know why customers get angry in the first place. To do this, it's probably helpful to turn the tables and put yourself in the place of the customer. You are, after all, a customer too! What makes you angry or upset? Chances are the same things that press your hot button have the same effect on your customers. By focusing a bit on these issues you can reduce the stress and headaches that come with unhappy customers. Let's look at a few reasons customers become upset with a business (and usually take it out on the frontline service associate!).

Why Customers Get Upset

- ★ Expectations not met
 - ★ Someone was rude
 - ★ Someone was indifferent
 - ★ No one listened
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1. **Customer did not get what was expected.** Put another way, you did not get what was promised to you. I recently contracted to have my two-story frame house spray washed to get rid of dirt and mildew. The house washer, a pleasant, professional young man with a good reputation, arrived early one morning and began the three-hour job. He informed me prior to starting that I might want to put towels around the windows and doors so that the pressurized water wouldn't get into the house. No problem; I followed

him around the inside of the house with towels as he washed outside and no water got in. About 24 hours after the house was cleaned (it was spotless!), I noticed that most of our plants and shrubs were dying. When I called the company, the gentleman informed me that due to low water pressure in my housing area, he had doubled the bleach solution to compensate and make sure that the upper part of the house was cleaned. I had the cleanest house on the block, but the landscaping looked like a nuclear winter had set in. I certainly didn't get what I expected.

Same song, second verse. Have you ever pulled into a motel after a long day's drive and gone inside to register (armed with your confirmation number) only to discover that the motel is not holding a reservation for you and that all of the rooms are booked? Fortunately, this doesn't happen often, but when it does, and your expectation is not met, anger and frustration are the order of the day.

I recently experienced the opposite situation at a Hampton Inn in Savannah, Georgia. Upon checking in, the desk receptionist politely informed me that the motel did have my reservation and a room ready. It seems, however, that three busloads of high-school students on a senior trip were about to descend on the hotel. The receptionist offered me a complimentary room at a comparable motel several blocks away. That's an expectation met and exceeded! Had the offer not been made (and readily accepted!), I would have been calling the front desk at two in the morning angrily asserting my rights as a customer.

Thousands of examples could be given of expectations not met. Who hasn't been in the drive-through lane of a fast food restaurant, ordered and received food, driven home, opened the bag, and discovered either wrong or missing items? Your anger and frustration over not getting what you expected are immediate. Or which one of us has not pulled a freshly cleaned and pressed shirt out of the plastic bag only to have a button crumble in our hand!

The solution? Raise the quality of your product or service or, in some cases, make sure the customer is clear in advance on what to expect. Think back to my house washing experience. I could have covered my

plants with plastic had I known they were in imminent danger of extinction! As for the Hampton Inn manager, he not only made clear to me what to expect (noisy teenagers), but took it one step further by offering an attractive alternative as a way of avoiding an unhappy customer.

2. **Someone was rude.** Nothing can make a customer angry more quickly than rudeness. Many times the customer is perceiving, not receiving, rude treatment. Doesn't matter! Again, perception is reality in the customer service business. A newspaper I write for had an account for years with a photo shop next door. We bought a lot of film and had a lot of pictures developed there. One day, as I dropped off some negatives, the owner told (not asked) me to have our business manager come down and see him about a delinquent invoice. When she arrived in the store a few minutes later, he blurted out (in earshot of numerous customers), "Ah, *Business Journal* bookkeeper accountant lady, come into my office to discuss your account." Was she embarrassed? Was he rude? Did we cancel our account? Did the owner care? The answers are yes, yes, yes, and NO!

Ever been to the refund and exchange desk of a department store on the day after Christmas? It sometimes seems that all rules of civility are suspended for customers and sales associates alike on that day. Or even worse, the customer service desk of an airline just following cancellation of the last flight to Anywhere, USA. With frustration at a fever pitch, and tempers as short as summer in Alaska, the mere statement, "I'm sorry, we've had to cancel the flight because the engine fell off," might be perceived as rude behavior by some.

The solution? Read on. We'll give you some practical advice later in this chapter on how to deal with challenging customers without resorting to rude behavior.

3. **Someone was indifferent.** Have you ever asked a question of a service provider and been greeted with a response such as, "I don't know, I just work here," or "That's our policy." Words,

actions, and attitude of frontline service people frequently communicate a "can't do, can't help you" message to customers.

The solution? Make sure your associates feel like a part of the team and give them the authority and support to make a difference with customers. At Ritz-Carlton, well known for outstanding customer service, every employee at every new hotel hears personally from CEO Horst Schulze about the mission, vision, and values of the hotel, as well as his high service expectations. What's more, Ritz employees, from manager to bellhop, are empowered to make things right for customers, even if it means spending some money to do it. It's a powerful message. And it works!

4. **No one listened.** This is perhaps the most troubling reason of all why customers get upset. By not listening we have wasted an opportunity to satisfy a customer. We have also lost some valuable feedback to improve our products or services. The following letter was actually written by a friend to the corporate headquarters of a home video company. While you can debate the issue of who is right in this situation, the fact is the customer never received a reply to his feedback other than a one-line "Thanks for your letter." That's not listening.

Dear Sir,

It is 9:15 Friday night and I have just gotten home from one of your video stores. Going to this particular location is something that my family and I have done on a regular basis for the last 10 years. When we first started to patronize the store, it was a xxxxxxxx Video Store. We chose this store because, unlike the xxxxxxxx Video nearby, this store did not require me to fill out a credit application revealing my personal income for the privilege of renting a videotape. I had, and still have, a difficult time understanding why my personal income is something a clerk needs in order to determine if I am worthy of having ten dollars worth of credit extended to me. Unfortunately, xxxxxxxx purchased the store, but we continued to use it. The reason for this letter is to give you some feedback on how your employees are treating customers.

When I tried to check a movie out tonight, the clerk asked me for my name. After I told her my last name, she asked for my first name. When I told her it was Doug, she asked if it was Louise. To this I responded, "No, that is my wife's name." The clerk then asked me if my name was Mark, to which I answered, "No, that is my son's name." She then informed me that I was not eligible to check out the movie unless she called my wife or son to see if it was all right. It did not matter that I had been checking out videos for 10 years. As you can imagine, I was a bit disappointed in the way I was treated and decided that the time in my life when I had to be given permission for those sorts of things had long passed.

Are your clerks not allowed to practice common sense? I am a 46-year-old, bald-headed, overweight certified public accountant. I have worked in the same job for the last nine years and lived in the same house for 12 years. I hardly have the appearance of someone who would pose a serious threat to one of your videotapes. My income is sufficient to support one son in college and another in private high school. I only tell you that as further indication of my ability to abstain from doing something you might regret if your employee were to rent me a videotape.

Your mission, "To be a global leader in rentable home entertainment by providing outstanding customer service . . ." was hardly furthered by your employees tonight. If you do not believe customer service and common sense are paramount in a service industry like yours, you most assuredly will be in for a long ride. If you are interested in doing something about this all too important shortfall, I will be happy to share with you the name of a person whom, I truly believe, can provide you with valuable insight into how improvements can be made in this area.

Yours truly,

The solution? Listen carefully and with empathy, then do something with the feedback. Refer back to Chapter 7 for some practical tips on listening effectively.

OK, you've done everything possible to be pleasant, to listen, and to meet your customers' expectations, and they are still upset. Now what? Satisfying even the most challenging customers is a critical skill. Most of us are pretty good at dealing with customers when they are rational, reasonable,

and logical because we can analyze situations, provide facts, and give information and technical answers pretty well. The problem is that challenging customers don't respond to logic with logic; they respond with emotion. In fact, the more logical we become, the angrier they get. The only solution to this dilemma is to deal with emotions (theirs and yours) first. The brain simply won't process logic until the anger and frustration are put aside. Here is a proven six-step strategy for dealing with challenging customers.

Dealing with Challenging Customers

1. Stay calm yourself.
 2. Let the customer vent.
 3. Deal with emotion first.
 4. Avoid emotional trigger words.
 5. Gently confront abusive customers.
 6. Delay action or consult a second opinion.
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1. **Stay calm.** If you can't remain calm in the heat of battle (and often it is very difficult to do), forget the remaining five steps in this strategy. They simply won't work. Here are two techniques for staying calm.

* Remember the acronym STOP.

S—Signal. How do you feel when you first start to grow angry? Does your jaw clench or heart pound? Do you feel suddenly warm or experience sweaty palms? These and other feelings are your early warning signs that anger is setting in. Be aware of them.

T—Take control by

O—Doing the Opposite of your early warning signal. Drink some water, dry your hands, unclench your jaw, or take a deep breath. Deep breathing, for example, keeps your voice opened and relaxed, not rushed and panicky.

P—Finally, Practice. Being aware of your early warning signals and how best to deal with them won't guarantee that you stay calm but

will sure increase your odds. If you don't know your early warning signals, ask a coworker or family member. They probably do!

1. **Listen to your self-talk.** Remember earlier in the book when we discussed the power of self-talk? When you find yourself dealing with challenging customers, you will really be utilizing those self-talk skills. When confronting an angry or upset customer, it is very likely that you are saying (to yourself) such things as: "Who do they think they are?" "I don't have to stand here and take this," or "I can't believe anyone would keep going on like this." This type of self-talk only serves to make you angry. Try changing that internal voice into phrases such as "This customer must really be having a bad day to be acting like this," or "I hope I don't sound like that when I'm upset." Modifying your self-talk will help you remain calm and logical with even the most difficult customers.
2. **Let the customer vent.** Listen carefully and don't interrupt. Chances are the customer has memorized exactly what he is going to say, so you might as well let him finish. If the customer is in a public place, try to move to a private room and deal with the situation one-on-one. Don't rush this step; you'll know when the venting is finished, usually by an audible outflow of air.
3. **Don't move to logic yet; deal with the customer's emotions first.** Get your customers talking about what's upsetting them. Here are some tips:
 - Show empathy for the situation. "Mr. Jones, I guess I would be upset too if I received a \$350 electric bill."
 - Find areas of agreement with your customer. "I know it's frustrating to have to call back for the second time."
 - Restate what you heard them say. "So you're concerned because this is the highest bill you've ever received from us."
 - Thank the customer (yes, thank him) for bringing the situation to your attention.

The goal is to gradually move the customer from an emotional to a logical state of mind.

4. **Avoid emotional trigger words.** All these do are add fuel to the fire and escalate the anger. Have you ever stood in line for an hour or more to renew a driver's license or register your car only to find out that you have to come back with more paperwork? Were you angry when you left? Probably so, but not because you needed more documents but because you were greeted with emotional trigger words such as, "Look lady..." or "It's state policy." Try using calming words and phrases instead.

TRIGGERS	CALMERS
Policy	Here's what we can do
Can't	Can
Sorry	Thank You
No, I don't know	I can find out
But	And
You should have	I understand why you
The only thing we can do	The best option I think

5. **Gently confront abusive customers.** Most of the time we never reach this stage. After trying the previous four steps and the customer is still difficult, gently confront using a calm and helpful tone of voice. Use the customer's name, but gently set limits to the behavior. Here's how it would sound: "Mr. Jones, I really want to help you. As long as you continue to use this language, I am finding it very difficult to help. I can get this taken care of. Will you let me?" In most cases the customer will answer yes, and you can move on to logic. If the customer is still difficult, move on to the next step.
6. **Delay action or consult a second opinion.** If all else fails, call time out. Say something like, "Let me look into this matter and

I'll get back with you in a few minutes." Consult with a team leader or the manager and, if necessary, bring one of them in on the conversation. Some angry customers calm down just because their grievance has been taken to a higher level. Remember, when all is said and done and the situation is resolved, the customer will remember how he was treated longer than the problem itself.

Once you have been successful in calming the customer down, you are ready to move to problem solving. The objective now is to resolve your customer's problem immediately, whether they are on the phone or standing in front of you. Here's a good approach:

- * Put everything else aside and focus all of your experience and your talent on how to fix the problem.
- * If possible, involve the customer in the solution by asking a question such as "What can I do to make this right?" or "How would you like for us to handle this?" You will be surprised at how reasonable the requests will be. In most cases the customer's solution will involve less than you might have offered. And since the customer thought of it, he'll be much happier and more satisfied with the outcome.
- * Offer a solution based on what the customer thinks.
- * Finally, give the customer your personal commitment to his or her satisfaction. Give your name, extension, and days that you work so the customer can contact you with any further questions. This both reassures the customer and gives him a person—you—who knows the history of the situation and with whom they have built some rapport.

On some occasions, no matter how hard you have tried, the situation with a customer has gone haywire and you must deliver bad news. A long-awaited special order item for a Christmas gift has been discontinued by the manufacturer. The shipment of parts to an automobile assembly plant has been delayed because of a truck breakdown.

The telephone installation scheduled for this afternoon will have to be rescheduled because a thunderstorm took down some lines in another area. There are hundreds of reasons! Here are seven suggestions on how to deliver bad news and still keep the customer in your corner.

1. Inform the customer as early in the process as possible. You've heard the phrase, "Bad news is like a dead fish. It only gets worse with time." Most customers are understanding people, *if you keep them informed* in a timely manner.
2. Inform the customer over the phone or in person, not by letter or e-mail. The personal touch is critical at a time like this.
3. Get to the point quickly: "You're not going to like hearing this."
4. Treat the customer fairly. It will be remembered. Spend some time (and even money) fostering goodwill.
5. Apologize sincerely. Thank the customer for their patience and understanding.
6. Ask for another opportunity to serve them in the future.
7. Do not let it affect your interaction with the next customer.

What do you do about customers who are wrong? First of all, of course, you must recognize that customers are never wrong. They may have different expectations or they may have been overpromised and oversold, but they're never wrong. (Don't worry, they'll remind you!) Remember, we began this chapter by saying that customers are not always right or correct. Aren't we contradicting ourselves? Not really! The difference between not right and wrong is in perception. The customer may be absolutely off base in his rationale or assumptions about your product or service. Since he perceives he has been wronged, the burden is on you, the service provider, to make things right if you want to see that customer again. If you don't care, tell him he's wrong and he can take his money elsewhere (but remember how many other people he will tell!).

With that in mind, here are some techniques to use when the customer appears to be wrong.

1. Deal with emotions first. Help the customer vent. This is the time to use calming words rather than trigger phrases discussed earlier.
2. Establish the facts. Use active listening techniques to find out exactly what happened and why the customer is unhappy.
3. Remember that the customer *is always* the customer, even if he or she appears to be wrong.
4. Maintain respect, and by all means, don't try to place blame on the customer.
5. Move to problem solving, and explain your organization's position.
6. Find the best available option. Be flexible and try to arrive at a win-win solution: the organization follows the spirit of its policy, but the customer always gets some concessions.

Throughout this chapter we have talked about dealing with angry or upset customers with a goal of keeping them in our corner (or at least in our store). Once you have lost a customer (or are on the verge), what do you do to recover? Even utilizing all your tools, there are times you simply can't make things right, when your product or service didn't perform as promised and a customer is disappointed. This is where the following recovery skills come in.

Customer Recovery Skills

- ☆ Apologize sincerely
 - ☆ Take responsibility for fixing the problem
 - ☆ Solve the problem quickly
 - ☆ Involve the customer
 - ☆ Do something extra
 - ☆ Follow up
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1. **Apologize sincerely.** Customers can tell when you are faking it! All too often the apology comes across as a flat monotone, such as "Sorry about that." This is a time when tone of voice and body

language are all important. Apologize to the customer in the same manner as you would want to receive the apology had you been wronged.

2. **Take responsibility for fixing the problem.** Don't lay blame and don't make excuses, just set about to solve the problem. Many customer-focused organizations have a policy that the associate first hearing of a problem owns it until it is resolved. That may mean getting others involved, doing some research, and then getting back to the customer with an answer.
3. **Solve the problem quickly.** Customers want a resolution to the problem, and they don't want to wait very long for an answer. For example, a customer calls his supplier after having received an invoice with no purchase order number included. A quick response would be, "I'm sorry, let me read that purchase order number to you now," or "I can fax you a corrected invoice or put one in the mail today. Which would you prefer?" Problem solved!
4. **Involve the customer.** Find out what is most useful to them, not what is easiest for you. Notice in the example just given that the supplier involved the customer by asking whether he wanted the new invoice faxed or sent by mail. Involving the customer is easy to do but is a skill often forgotten in service recovery.
5. **Do something extra.** Correcting the problem is not enough. Recognize the "hassle factor" that your customer experienced. A gift certificate, complimentary glass of wine, or deep discount on a price are just a few examples of little extras that don't cost much and make the difference in winning back a lost customer. Here are a few other innovative ideas we have seen for recovering disappointed customers:

- A dentist's office that gives movie passes to patients who have had to wait an unreasonably long time to be seen;
- A fast food restaurant that gives a free order of French fries to customers who have been in line a very long time;
- A department store that takes an additional percentage off the retail price when an item has to be backordered for a customer;

- A copy machine repair company that brings a complimentary case of paper to a business when it has exceeded the estimated repair date and time following a trouble call.

What Can You Do?

List below a few extras that you and your organization might offer to disappointed customers to recover their loyalty.
