



Dealing With Angry And Difficult Customers

by DAVE KAHLE

No one looks forward to an encounter with an angry or difficult customer. Most of us can't help but feel emotionally impacted by an upset customer. An ugly incident can ruin our entire day.

Not only that, but there is usually some damage that can be done to the company by the angry customer. Our job security is not enhanced when the company loses business. Put those two things together, and you can see that dealing effectively with an angry customer becomes a challenge that we must overcome.

Here are some tips to make your next confrontation easier for you, better for your company and much more satisfying to the customer.

- **Don't take it personally.**

Unless you were personally in-

volved in the incident that caused the customer's anger, the customer probably isn't angry with you. He's angry with your company, and he's angry with the consequences that impact him. There is no reason that you should take it personally. You are just the current expression of your company, the most convenient representative.

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When you take the customer's anger personally, it's so much easier to become defensive and argumentative, and when that happens, the net effect is to turn a bad situation into something even worse.

even worse. When you are tempted to react in kind, emotionally, just tell yourself that this is not about you.

- **Listen.**

That is often enough to turn a customer's attitude around. It is amazing how powerful an empathic, active listener can be. When you sincerely and actively listen, that calms the customer down, it shows him that you are interested, it gives some credence to his/her position, and, it gives you some information and time to think. A magic elixir!

- **Empathize.**

If you were the customer, and this thing had happened to you, how would you feel? Wouldn't you also be upset?

Empathizing doesn't take much effort on your part, and it has a powerful impact on a tense situation. When you empathize with the customer by letting him know that you understand how he feels, you release much of the tension from the situation. Picture a balloon that you have blown up almost to the point of bursting. There is tremendous tension inside the balloon pushing outward. But when you open the bottom, and let some of that pressure out, the balloon relaxes. Same thing when you empathize with the customer. Picture yourself letting air out of the bottom of that balloon.

- **Apologize.**

This sometimes seems like too little, too late. Regardless, it's the minimum acceptable response. If your customer has been wronged, or thinks that he or she has been wronged, apologizing for your company is the least you can do. If you are afraid of admitting responsibility, then let the customer know that you are sorry this thing

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happened to him. That's general enough to not accept any responsibility, and still convey a message of concern.

- **Don't blame.**

No one cares who is at fault. No one really cares that so-and-so in inventory control didn't order enough inventory, or that the picking clerk mis-picked the order, or any one of a thousand other possible mistakes that other people may have made. Blaming someone emphasizes that you are more concerned with yourself than you are with making things right with the customer. It emphasizes the past (what happened), instead of the future (what you can do to fix this.)

Blame is the first response of a small person. Don't show yourself to be in that league by immediately jumping to blame someone.

- **Ask.**

Always ask something of the customer. By asking, you show your interest in the customer, indicate that you really do want to understand, and give the customer an opportunity to describe their situation. Ask about the details, ask about the situation, ask what the customer would like to see as a solution. Don't worry about asking the wrong thing. Almost any question in that situation is going to have a positive impact on the customer. No matter what, ask.

- **Promise accurately.**

The worst thing you can do is to make some grandiose or unfounded promise to fix the customer's problem, and then not follow through on it. Or make a promise on behalf of your company, and then discover that your company is not able to meet the terms of your promise.

By doing that, you've fed the customer's frustration and added fuel to an already hotly burning fire. It is far better to not promise anything than it is to jump to a hasty and unfounded promise.

- **Deliver more.**

Here's an opportunity to turn the customer around. Deliver more than what you promise. If you say you'll have a replacement to him on Friday, try to get it there on Wednesday. If you say you'll replace that gallon of paint with a free gallon, throw in an extra brush. A little something above and beyond what you promise is a great way to say that you are sorry for the previous inconvenience, and leave the customer with a good feeling about the encounter with you and your company.

- **If possible, follow up.**

To this day, I remember a hotel calling back the day after I rented a small conference room to ask if everything had been acceptable. That follow-up call was 18 years ago, but I still remember the powerful, positive impact it

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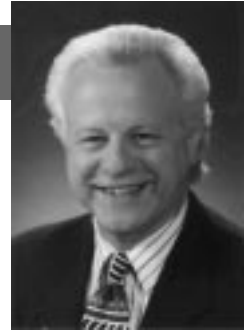
made on me. Someone cared enough to call after the fact and determine that I had been satisfied. What a concept!

Your follow-up call can have the same effect.

A difficult and angry customer is one of the most intense challenges you'll face. Implement these tips and watch yourself grow in confidence as you expertly handle these hot situations. □

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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