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# Calming “Customonsters” And Other High-Maintenance Clients

by KATE ZABRISKIE

It’s been more than 20 years since Madonna first sang about being a “material girl in a material world.”

Since that time, women and men have become more demanding of businesses and what they

expect in terms of service. One might argue that this age of the high-maintenance customer is simply due to businesses’ inability to get qualified help, and in some cases this is true. However, the facts are that product and service customization, competition and “the customer is always right” have helped create more than a few high-maintenance “customonsters” that over time may be more work than they are worth to your business.



**T**o endure demanding customers and provide your employees the tools they need to successfully manage that audience, there are several actions you should take when planning your service strategy and tactics.

*Determine what you will and won’t do to satisfy customers.* The

point is, you must have rules in place. Otherwise, you are headed for a path of inconsistency and dissatisfaction. To kick off your planning, answer the following questions:

- Are there some customers we would rather not have? If so, who are they?

- How much abuse do I expect to take or expect my employees to take from difficult customers? Am I willing to be yelled at? Called stupid, incompetent, etc.?
- What special accommodations will I make to satisfy the demanding when they are justified in complaining and when they aren’t?

*Train your employees on the rules you have put in place.* Be prepared to visit and revisit this step several times. Turnover and other circumstances will affect your need for training. Furthermore, effectively dealing with

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“customonsters” is not always an intuitive process. One training session is usually not enough. Practice, practice and more practice makes for better service. Your training should include most if not all of the following information:

- Teach your employees to explain your processes to your customers to align their expectations with what you can realistically deliver. Remember to remind employees to stay calm and not to yell, no matter how angry the other person gets.
- Keep the focus on the problem, not the person. If the customer is unhappy that you don't have a service or product available today, keep the conversation about what services or products are available, what you can substitute and any discounts you may have.
- Tell your employees not to let the customer make this personal by answering rhetorical questions such as, “Do you have any idea how this is going to make me look, if I don't get this product today?” If your employees take the bait, there's no winning.
- Give employees a Plan B. If the customer is not happy with an employee's efforts, have someone else, such as a manager or supervisor, who the employee can direct the customer toward. If you don't do this and employees don't

know what to do, all bets are off as to what you might get. Do yourself a favor and don't leave Plan B up to chance.

**Recognize and reward employees who handle difficult and demanding customers well.** It's impossible to expect employees to make the right decision 100% of the time. However, if they know you are watching and that you treat every mistake as a learning opportunity, you are more likely to get the best out of your staff.

**Never embarrass your employees in front of customers, never yell at them in front of customers, and don't immediately assume that the customer is giving you the full picture.** “Customonsters” feed on negativity. The last thing you want to do is reinforce bad behavior by communicating through your actions that abuse is okay — even if you have decided that you will take a fair amount from the customers yourself.

**If all else fails, you may consider freeing your “customonsters” by suggesting other businesses they might find more suitable.** But remember, most of the time you should be able to satisfy your customers — even the material boys and girls, if you have solid processes in place, act professionally, and follow up on any promises you make. □

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Kate Zabriskie is founder of Business Training Works, Inc., a company that specializes in down-to-earth soft skills training in the workplace. She and her team help people develop the skills they need to be successful at work: business etiquette, interpersonal communication skills, business writing, presentation skills, customer service, negotiation, time management and other essentials. The company's clients include Microsoft, Georgetown University, Schering Plough, the USDA, the United States Coast Guard, and Bank One. For more information, visit: [www.businesstrainingworks.com](http://www.businesstrainingworks.com) or call: (301) 934-3250.

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