

Dealing with Angry Customers

By Laurie Guest

Nobody wants them, yet we all have them—angry customers. It doesn't matter what position you hold in the office, knowing how to handle the dissatisfied consumer is crucial. Let's take a look at the twelve steps to dealing with an angry person:

1. Stay Calm.

Most of the time it is our front line staff who take the brunt of angry customers. It is instinctive to flee or fight when faced with a tense situation and neither are the right answer. Staffers must train themselves to stay calm. Take slow and deep breaths while concentrating on maintaining eye contact.

2. Stop, look, listen, lean forward, be responsive.

If possible, move agitated customers from your counter area to a private room or adjacent hallway. Stop all other activity and concentrate on what the person tells you. Body language is an important tool for showing a customer you are serious about resolving the issue. Nodding, eye contact, and note taking are all excellent modes of silent communication. Most importantly, keep quiet. If you interrupt, the person will assume you are not listening and often feel the need to start over again. Patiently listen to the whole story. When the customer has clearly finished, you may proceed to respond. When it is your turn to speak, begin with agreement. Even if this requires really digging to uncover some common ground, do so. Obviously, you are not going to agree with false statements, but you could reply with: "I'm glad you brought this to our attention. I'd like to help solve this problem."

3. Accept the anger.

Try not to take the demonstration of anger personally. A majority of the time people do not know how to express displeasure pleasantly—I suppose that's an oxymoron. Some people assume they will get better results with rage than with polite dialog. (By the way, if YOU are ever the angry customer in a place of business, this is a great step to use in your favor. Help the other person by saying in a sincere, pleasant tone: "I know it isn't your fault, but I'm very upset about this situation and I hope you can help me." This often works better than berating an innocent team member.)

4. Accept responsibility.

Never say: "There's nothing I can do." That statement is like gasoline on a campfire. Although it may range from simply gathering facts to solving the problem, there's ALWAYS something you can do. If you are a member of the team, then all the work done for the customer is a reflection of the overall quality. A few years ago we went to the Milwaukee Zoo over the 4th of July weekend. Nearly all the teenagers working concessions were rude and acted as if their summer was being disrupted. This behavior always upsets me. Our family complained about it to each other most of the time we spent there. When we were leaving, we stopped to buy a soda for the road. The clean-cut boy working the stand was polite and considerate. However, if I had a questionnaire to rate our satisfaction of the staff at the zoo, I would have marked the lowest grade possible, even though a few individuals were doing a great job. Why is that? Because majority rules. If most of the contacts we had were surly, we assume all the workers are the same. A similar principle applies in our office. All-for-one-and-one-for-all is the way a successful office should operate.

5. Refer to the proper person.

As soon as you have determined the best person to solve their problem, explain it to the customer. Choose your words carefully: "Mr. Smith, the best person to help you with XYZ situation is Melanie our staff member in charge of 123. Let me explain your needs to her and she will be happy to fix this right away."

- "Mr. Smith"—use the customer's name.
- "XYZ" - identify the problem as you see it.
- "Melanie, in charge of 123"—give identity to the person who can solve the problem.
- "will be happy to take care of this"—indicates we're not bothered in any way.
- "let me explain to her"—removes the need for the customer to rehash the issue.
- "we will fix this right away"—responsive.

These two short sentences carry a bundle of information to the customer.

6. Ask questions.

This step reminds me of the old rule to "gather your facts." It is a fundamental rule by which we should all live. There is always more to the story. By asking questions you can uncover hidden facts to help you put the puzzle together.

Ask questions like:

- "What were you told?"
- "When did you call?"
- "Do you know who you spoke to?"

7. Restate the problem; ask for confirmation.

If you have successfully followed the first six steps, you should have a basic understanding of the complaint. Now is the time to summarize the story. Remember to present the recap from the customer's perspective. In other words, if you know a part of the story is not accurate, you can insert such bridges as "and you feel, Mr. Smith" or "your impression was."

8. Respond visibly.

Be careful to have the right facial expression. The easiest way to achieve this step is to simply nod. Try not to be too defensive even if you're the cause of the complaint. Avoid being too smiley; serious, professional and focused are the best traits to show.

9. Agree.

I'm not asking you to agree with a customer who may be insulting, rude, or wrong. Agreeing in this case means to understand or empathize. A well-known technique for dealing with a complaint is the "Feel, Felt, Found" method. "I understand how you *feel*, Mr. Smith. I would have *felt* that way, too. What we have *found* is that if we (insert solution here), it seems to help."

10. Develop solutions.

This is my favorite step. It is often the turning point in defrosting an angry person. Start tossing out suggestions to solve the problem. If it's a simple scenario, one solution often suffices. Other times, multiple options are necessary. When faced with a customer who will not respond to any of your suggestions, try this statement: "What can we do to make this situation better?" Occasionally the reply is: "There's nothing you CAN do!"

11. Exceed expectations.

We refer to this as "REPLACE Plus 1." That means not only do we try to solve the problem, but we add a touch of appreciation with it. Adding a special touch or offer that applies to your industry is a great place to start. This applies when your organization is clearly "in the wrong" and needs to make up for a poor decision or unfortunate situation.

12. Personalize.

This can be the turning point when dealing with an extremely irate person. Once, I dealt with a customer in rage. I tried everything to calm him. Aside from just standing there and nodding, I had no ammunition to his verbal abuse. I kept quiet even though I wanted to yell back. Finally, when he appeared to be finished, I started my first sentence with his first name and I said it in a tone like we were old friends. Immediately, he seemed to relax a little. I quickly asked what I could do to make the situation better. He came up with a simple suggestion, one I hadn't thought of. I agreed that his idea was a great compromise and he seemed satisfied.

After enough practice, the steps in dealing with angry customers becomes second nature. Unfortunately, there isn't a hard and fast rule on how to use the steps. Many times I find myself using step 12 first.