

Dealing with difficult customers to ensure a positive outcome

Handling a customer complaint either by phone or face to face can be a challenging task, especially if it is highly charged with emotion and irrational statements. A natural reaction would be to feel defensive and try to explain why a particular situation had occurred. This reaction will only put you on the back foot.

Research has shown that for every 25 customers who complain only 1 will express their thoughts and feelings directly to the organisation responsible for the problem. The other 24 unhappy customers won't contact you, but will instead tell between 10 and 20 others about their experience. This often has a compounding effect and before long there can be hundreds of potential customers with a negative perception of your company but you will be unaware of the damage to your credibility and lost sales opportunities.

A. Don't take it personally

When listening to a customer complaint, we can often become emotionally involved leading to us feeling hurt, becoming annoyed or even angry. These are warning signals that you may react defensively rather than respond calmly to the customer. This behaviour shows up in the tone of our voice, our speech rate and lets your client know that you have lost control.

A customer complaint is being aimed at your company or the 'professional you' so please don't take it personally. Instead welcome the complaint because the customer is giving you the opportunity to fix their problem and resolve the situation. Customers who don't complain won't come back either and will most probably spreading bad news.

B. Acknowledge the customer

Acknowledge means to recognise the customer with genuine gratitude. This is the first step in your taking control. Begin by breathing deeper and slower, this will allow your voice to sound calm, project warmth and credibility. Shallow, quick breathing makes us talk too quickly, with a higher pitch betraying that we are under stress and not in control.

You should acknowledge what they are saying by using survival phrases such as *"I appreciate you drawing this issue to my attention...Thank you for calling or I can understand how you must be feeling."*

C. Actively listen and empathise

Unfortunately many sales opportunities and customer relationships are lost due to poor listening. It's a huge cost to business. Many people function at only 25% of their active listening capacity.

Active listening involves your full concentration on what the customer is saying and feeling. It also requires you to be patient and not interrupt even if what they are saying is incorrect or the right person to handle the problem is right next to you. To do so with a particularly volatile angry customer will only inflame the situation. When a person is filled with emotion they are not ready to listen to any rational response. They are upset and want someone to hear them out. After most of the emotion is out of their system, they will be ready to listen to a rational response from you.

Research has shown that an extremely emotional outburst can last for up to 40 seconds.

The basics of active listening:

1) Listen to the information

Hearing is a passive and an automatic process. It isn't until you make a conscious effort to listen and tune into what is being said that active listening begins.

2) Understand the Information

Accurately interpreting what the customer has said through their words and vocal tone. You may need to paraphrase to ensure you have fully understood what was said. Aim to understand the customer's feelings and read between the lines, in other words find out what they are really saying. Take notes if appropriate. This will also slow the process and the customer's anger will dissipate quicker because they will see that you really care by the fact you are trying to get all the facts.

3) Assess the information

Whether you agree or disagree with what has been stated, don't react by jumping to conclusions, because the information could be incomplete or filtered. When you are in doubt ask more questions or paraphrase.

4) Respond to the information

Your verbal and non-verbal feedback need to be in harmony and communicate that you have listened, understood and accurately assessed what the customer has told you. This will create mutual understanding. Inappropriate responses are:

- Reacting defensively or aggressively
- Remaining silent and not responding

5. Ask Questions

This is an opportunity for you to take control, reduce the customer's frustration or anger and at the same build rapport. These 3 outcomes are possible because if you ask open questions starting with - *who, what, where, when and how* to encourage the customer to speak freely and provide you with all the information you need. At an emotional level as the customer is speaking they will also be releasing their negative feelings relating to the problem. They will then be ready to listen to you. By showing that you care for the customer, actively listening and asking questions the customer will respond in a positive manner.

Research has shown that 68% of the reasons behind why customers won't buy from the same person or company again are because they feel that they don't care.

6. Find a solution and ask for feedback

Once you have all the information, you will hopefully be in a position to solve the customer's problem. Sometimes it is as straight forward as providing a refund or a credit. There are times when it's more complex. In these situations why not ask the customer what they think would be a fair solution? You may be surprised that the customer's answer is less costly to your company than the one you were considering. You could ask *"Mary if you were in my shoes what would you do to resolve this issue?"*

Once a solution has been agreed upon it's important to ask for the customer's feedback. This way you can be sure that the customer is satisfied with the outcome. You might say *"If I was to provide you with a credit note would that be okay with you?"* or *"That takes care of that doesn't it?"*

7. Follow up

It is rare for a customer who has complained to receive a follow up to check they are still happy. This can be done simply with a phone call or a thank you card sent in the mail. It is an opportunity to differentiate yourself and your company from your competitors and it will help you to build loyal customer relationships.

Research has found that if a complaint has been handled well from the customer's perspective, 91% of them will come back and buy from you again. In fact, they will feel a closer connection because of the emotional experience they shared with you. The customer knows that in future if there is a problem it isn't a problem because you will look after them and then follow up. This can also lead to referred business.

Dealing with difficult customers can be an uncomfortable experience but taking a professional approach by responding objectively as opposed to reacting in a defensive way, will help you build good customer relationships.

If you want more information about this subject or have any sales performance issue you would like to discuss please contact Kurt Newman direct on 0412 252 236. Alternatively email sales@salesconsultants.com.au



Kurt's expertise is in sales strategy, sales management development; group structured sales training and infield sales coaching. As a sales person he has successfully sold products and services in 4 major market/product segments: new product sales, consultative sales, relationship sales and retail. During his selling career he created sales records for three companies in two industries and won many sales awards for outstanding performance