

The Six Basic Steps for Dealing With Tough Customers

By Judi Moreo

Every day millions of people risk their lives by ignoring the lethal effects of stress caused by the frustration of not getting around to important work because of highly difficult and demanding customers that interfere with their productivity.

To make matters worse they feel as though they are harassed by their managers who constantly bombard them with the flow of irritating catchwords like *customer focus*, *delighting the customer*, *customer care*, *delivering customer service*, *customer satisfaction* – when things are out of control!

Difficult customers and clients typically represent just a fraction of the customers we see each day, but they have a profound impact on people's performance and motivation. Whether it is an irate customer, an unreasonable customer or an unhappy customer, they all create stress.

What makes dealing with a difficult customer especially difficult is that we very often feel attacked and therefore, we take it personal. We will automatically respond with the same attitude they are giving us. Their attitude definitely does not make us want to help them.

Take the example of Nancy who is a ticket agent in New York. As we know, travel delays and cancelled flights are an everyday occurrence. There are many times when nothing goes right on a particular day or week and finally it takes its toll. On one of these days, Nancy was dealing with a customer whose flight had been delayed so he demanded an upgrade. There were no upgrades available. No amount of explaining would stop the vicious language and behavior of the customer. Finally, Nancy's solution to this situation was "payback" (unbeknownst, of course, to this customer). The customer boarded the flight vowing never to fly on their airline again. Little did he know his luggage was not going with him! Now this is definitely not the best solution to a difficult situation, but haven't we all felt like doing something like this to our difficult customers at some time or another.

Wouldn't it be great to have a solution at hand every time a difficult, frustrated or irate customer appears?

Responding to angry, annoyed and frustrated customers takes a toll if you don't have a personal goal that no matter how angry, unreasonable, or aggressive the customers are, you will:

1. Let them know you understand their problems.
2. Let them know you value them and their business.

3. Let them know you will find a solution.

The best customer service professionals have the ability and the skills to reach through the customer's wall of pain and frustration to convey vital information calmly and confidently so that a solution follows and the customer's confidence is restored.

The seven basic steps for handling tough customers are:

Step One: Have the Right Attitude

Avoid the pitfalls that may hamper your ability to handle a difficult and demanding customer by thinking about what attitude you choose to take. Think of the opportunity you have to stop him or her from going to your opposition! Simply, think of that difficult customer as a challenge. The challenge is not to let them get away... just like a fish on the end of a fishing pole! When you adopt this kind of an attitude, you are less likely to take things personally and more likely to find a solution to any problem.

Step Two: Let Customers Vent

Listen to them. Remember, their anger is not personal. These customers are angry because there is a problem. They want two things: to express their feelings and to have their problems solved. Any time you allow customers to vent their frustrations, you are showing them that what has happened matters to you and you value their business. Apologize and acknowledge both the message and their feelings in a sincere manner. Letting them vent their anger and taking the time to empathize in the beginning saves time in the long run. Be sure not to interrupt the customer as this is likely to start the whole tirade over again. When you listen to the customer, your pay off is that you get information. You can only fully understand the problem once you have all the facts.

Step Three: Use the Right Verbiage

Using the right verbiage is like being trained in "verbal judo." You can immediately defuse anger by using statements like, *"I can understand how frustrated you must be to have been kept waiting,"* or *"Thank you for bringing this to my attention,"* or *"I am sorry this has happened to you. Let me see what I can do."* Other useful phrases are, *"Thank you for listening to me. I have three ways in which I can help you."* *"Here's what I can do."* Or *"Sir, I am going to help you. Please don't make it more difficult by continuing to yell at me?"* Don't use phrases such as, *"What's your problem?"* *"Calm down,"* or *"It's company policy."* *"If you would just listen to me for once....."* Remember, the art of getting a difficult or angry customer to calm down is in the way we speak and the words we use.

Step Four: Tell the Customer What You are Going To Do

Throughout the process, seek to solve the customers' problems and give them what they need. Tell the customer what course of action you are going to take. In the instances where a customer will not accept anything you say or do, you could ask, *"How would you like this handled?"* Or give options by saying such things as, *"Here's what I can do."* Or *"There are three ways we can fix your problem. Which of these would you prefer?"* Most of the time, they will thank you, even if what you did was very different from their first request.

Step Five: Take Action To Fix the Problem

Take the necessary steps to solve the problem. If it involves another person or department, bring the problem to the attention of the person who can do something about it. If it is something that can not be immediately resolved, be sure to contact the customer and tell him what is happening. You will make the situation worse if you leave him guessing as to what is happening.

Step Six: Follow-up With The Customer

Follow-up with the customer within a short period of time...even though it's not expected. This gives you an ideal opportunity to invite him to come and do business with you again. They probably will come back again simply because you have shown them that you value their business by resolving the problem. And you will have reduced your stress by being able to cope and by being in control of the situation.

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