

HOT, BOTHERED AND ALWAYS RIGHT

Conquer complaining customers, cool down a heated conversation and defang custo-monsters

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Customers aren't always pleasant. They have bad days, bad years even. They get in fights with their spouses, get bossed around at work and spend hours in traffic, in a slow boil before they walk through your doors or pick up the phone. With all those back stories, they're bound to carry some drama into your shop. But you and your staff don't have to be cast as the victim or the bad guy. With the right script and actions, you can steer your way toward more happy endings.



Conquer Complaining Customers

The Go-For-The-Throaters. These customers are angry and in your face (or in your ear on the phone). Their complaints are loud, lengthy and involved. You can barely get a word in edgewise.

Respond by staying quiet. Try not to interrupt. Instead, let them spin out their story and from time to time you can say, "Uh huh," "OK," and "I follow you." Once they have burned through their emotions, use closed-ended questions to quickly gather any additional information you need, such as, "What type of flowers did you ask to have included in the bouquet?" or, "What time did my associate tell you the order would be ready?" Let them know you appreciate their feedback and what you plan on doing about it.

The Quiet-As-A-Mousers. These customers have a problem but don't speak up about it. Their complaints come in the form of little clues you pick up in their tone of voice or body language. They may not say anything negative, but you can tell they're dissatisfied. It's tempting to ignore the signs and pretend that everything is OK, but remember, an unhappy customer is likely to tell other people how they feel.

Respond by digging a little deeper. Check to see what's going on by asking a leading question, such as, "Was the arrangement what you expected?" A curious question, asked sincerely, can get even the quietest of customers to open up and reveal the problem.



INSTANT GRATIFICATION

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The High Rollers. These customers have high standards and will settle for nothing but perfection. They are willing to pay for the gold standard of service, and if they don't get it, will let you know in a no-nonsense manner.

Respond by energetically and enthusiastically gathering all the information you need to fix the problem — then fix it! These customers are interested in solid results delivered in a speedy way — not excuses.

The Whiners. These customers seem to make a profession of complaining. Yes, they call you every month; yes, they are never happy; yes, you are tired of hearing their voices; yes, you want to ignore them, but they are not going away just because you wish they would.

Respond by switching to a frame of mind that focuses on what this customer needs and how you can provide it, and mustering all the patience you can summon. Listen to what they are saying, apologize (don't argue) and ask questions that show interest and concern (yes, it's hard). Most whiners are placated when they know you are interested and will do whatever you can to fix the issue.

The Tricksters. These customers complain as a strategy to get something for nothing. No matter what you say, do or offer, it's not good enough. Their goal is to escalate the situation until they can get something from you that they are not entitled to or is not fair, given the circumstances.

Respond by checking the facts and making sure the person is not trying to get something they are not entitled to. If they are, stay firm and only offer what is fair and reasonable under your company guidelines. Don't be derogatory or make accusations — no matter how transparent their motivation.

Handle, Heated Conversations

Navigating your way through a heated conversation can be like crossing a minefield. The following road map weaves together several stand-alone techniques into a process that will guide you through the twists and turns to arrive at a successful conclusion.

Let 'Em Vent. Customers want their problem fixed, but they also want to vent their feelings. The pressure they feel to let off steam is often so strong that your safest route is to stay quiet and give them lots of room to decompress. You can let them know you are interested and listening by occasionally saying "uh huh." If you are in a face-to-face interaction, be sure to maintain eye contact and nod from time to time as well. Stay on course by resisting the urge to interrupt — even if they light a spark in you by saying:

"You are the worst person I have ever dealt with in this company."

"They didn't train you very well."

"Let me talk to someone who is more competent."

"Since when did they start hiring idiots?"

Switch Filters. Irate customers can say and do things that might convince you they are the lowest form of human

life. Your disapproving opinion becomes a negative filter that fans the flames and moves you further away from a happy ending. Stay focused on the customer's underlying needs by switching filters and silently asking yourself:

"What does this person need and how can I provide it to the best of my ability?"

Show Empathy. After your customer has let off steam and you have switched any negative filters to service filters, it is safe to begin speaking. Start by showing empathy for the customer's situation. Put yourself in their shoes; let them know you understand what they are saying and why they are upset. ("I can see why you were disappointed — It was your mom's birthday, and it should have been perfect.") Empathy absorbs emotion and leads to dialogue.

Start Solving. Having acknowledged the customer's feelings, it is now time to begin solving their problem. Start by asking clarifying questions ("So you had specified yellow roses when you placed the order?") and avoid the temptation to form conclusions before you have heard the whole story. Assuming that you already know the answer diminishes your listening power and prevents you from hearing important details.

Once you know the facts, present the customer with a solution for consideration. If there are different solution options, present the pros and cons of each so the customer can make an informed choice.

Follow Up. Whenever possible, service stars follow up with their customers to ensure that the solution worked satisfactorily. If it did, then the follow-up acts as a courtesy call. If it didn't, alternative solutions are needed. In either case, the message to the customer is: We care and the buck stops here.

Manage Abusive Customers

Abusive customers are not your plain old garden-variety upset customers but people who have crossed the line and stormed into the territory of unacceptable behavior that can include personal insults, swearing and cursing, screaming and yelling, making threats and saying unflattering things about your mother.

While company policies may vary (check with yours — or develop one if you don't have one) on the specific strategies for managing abusive customers, keep in mind the following do's and don'ts:

Offer to help. Despite the customer's ranting, let him know, sincerely and clearly, that you really are trying to help.

Don't say: "Your rude behavior will not help solve this problem. You need to calm down."

Do say: "I want to solve your problem, but I am having a hard time with this conversation, because of your cursing/shouting/threats, etc."

Send them to a supervisor. If, after several warnings, the customer continues his offensive behavior, it may be time to move him up to a supervisor.

Don't say: "I am not going to put up with you any longer. You're going to have to talk to my supervisor."

Do say: "I am sorry but I can't seem to help you, I am going to have you speak with my supervisor."

End the interaction. If there isn't a supervisor available to take over, the next step is to politely end the conversation.

Don't say: "I am ending this conversation/call. I suggest you pull yourself together before you come or call back."

Do say: "I want you to be satisfied with our service but I'm unable to help, so I suggest you come/call back later."

Your customers supply some of the best feedback about what needs to be changed in your company policy, procedure and product. Every business receives these complaints; the smart ones view them as a source of valuable information. It's easy to get defensive and miss these hidden gems if you don't know how to identify and deal with customer complaint styles. 🌸

Excerpted from "Customer Service In An Instant: 60 Ways to Win Customers and Keep Them Coming Back."

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BOUNCE BACK

Abusive customers can knock the wind out of you and ruin your whole day. Here are some quick ways to get yourself back on track.

- **Walk a While.** A short walk provides a brief and healthy change of scenery that can shift your frame of mind. Even short periods of exercise (5 to 10 minutes) help you let go of pent-up emotions so that you can return to work feeling refreshed.
- **Use Your Imagination.** Find a private place where you can sit quietly for two minutes. Close your eyes and breathe slowly. As you breathe in imagine a feeling of peacefulness. Let that feeling spread through your body. Then breathe out and imagine exhaling all the stress and unpleasant feelings. Do this several times until you feel calmer.
- **Grab More Oxygen.** If you cannot leave your workstation or it's inconvenient to close your eyes, you can do a few breathing exercises right at your desk. Slowly inhale through your nose while mentally counting to four. As you inhale let your stomach naturally expand outward, this helps your shoulders and neck to relax. Exhale through your mouth while counting to six.
- **Relax.** Start by tensing the muscles in your face (yes, this looks strange, so skip this part of your body if you are in a meeting) and hold for six seconds. Next, exhale and relax your face completely. Feel the tension drain away. Use the same tense-and-release pattern for your neck, shoulders, chest, abdomen, legs and feet.

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