

Make CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS Work for You

By Bud Haney



One day we received a call from one of our strategic business partners. She was about to lose her biggest client because of a glitch in our e-mail system. How had this happened?

The first step in fixing the problem was to gather facts. The e-mail problem had originated when we installed new software that was not properly configured. The situation had worsened when the client called our office seeking technical assistance and received instructions that didn't fix the problem.

We quickly called a meeting of the people involved and soon had a temporary solution to use until we developed a permanent solution. Our Operations Vice President implemented the appropriate actions immediately. We called the strategic business partner and gave her an update on the situation. Next, we contacted her client and explained our situation, apologized for the inconvenience, and presented the temporary solution.

We not only saved the account, we were also complimented on our swift response to the situation. Through quick attention to both the problem

and the client, we turned a potentially bad situation into a positive one.

We recommend you consider customer complaints in a positive frame of mind and see them as suggestions for improving your products and the way you do business.

No matter how good you and your people are, or how good your products/services are, you will occasionally encounter an angry customer. A normally reasonable, happy customer who becomes angry transforms into a flesh-eating beast, bent on your destruction. Sometimes they come at you foaming at the mouth and demanding satisfaction. How do you talk 'em down?

There are two traditional ways. The first is to eat crow immediately, accept the blame fully, beg for forgiveness, kiss up, and do everything the customer-turned-beast asks in order to satisfy them. You'll likely keep the customer, but after you've groveled like that a few times, will you be able to look at yourself in the mirror and smile?

Another approach is to return the customer's anger, slug it out (verbally, at least), exchange blame and insults, deny all responsibility, and tell the customer where to get off. That way, you needn't worry about repeat complaints—after all, no customers, no complaints.

Calming angry customers and resolving complaints to their complete satisfaction need not mean sacrificing your self-respect. Experts have demonstrated that the following guidelines will resolve more problems more easily and turn a complaint into a positive experience for the customer. And you will still be able to look at yourself in the mirror and smile!

1. It's Your Problem, But Don't Take It Personally. It may not be your fault, but it's still your problem. Approach all angry customers with this attitude. Even if it is your fault, don't take the complaint personally. Customers complain because they want you to address a perceived shortcoming, not because they don't like you. Resist the temptation to fight back. Even if you win the battle, you'll lose the war—and the customer.

2. Listen. In order to address the customer's problem, you'll need to know exactly what the problem is. As with all other endeavors, listening is a key skill. Besides giving you some insight into the reason for the customer's distress, listening helps you to exorcise some of the initial anger the customer is feeling.

3. Don't Interrupt. Let complainants express themselves. Don't stop them mid-flow. Let them vent their anger; it will be easier to reason with them afterwards.

4. Calm Your Complainant and Clarify the Problem. When your customer has finished complaining, show some empathy. Explain that you understand why he or she is so upset and you're going to try to sort things out. Then clarify your understanding of the problem. Ask questions and qualify comments. This will calm your customer and ensure that your suggested solution will address all aspects of the perceived problem. Step into your customer's shoes. Look at your company, your products, the problem, and your actions from the customer's perspective, and then decide whether or not the complaint is justified.

5. If It's Your Fault, Say So. If It's Not, Don't. Once you fully understand the complaint, decide whether or not your company is at fault. Don't accept blame before you know it's warranted. But if the problem is clearly your fault, admit it early in the process. Accept responsibility and don't hide; don't try to pass the buck. Adopt a genuinely humble tone.

6. Solve the Problem. Think about how best to solve the customer's problems. If you need some time to come up with a response, tell him so and commit to getting back to him on a specified timetable. Then do it. Make sure all of your responses project a clearly concerned, but calm, manner. Stress your eagerness to resolve the problem, and project a calm confidence that you are the person to do it. When you have a suggested solution, agree with the customer about the steps you'll take and the timeframe for correction. Assure the customer that you'll take personal responsibility for seeing

the resolution through, and do so. Nothing is more important than resolving customer complaints. Attend to them with the utmost urgency. Research shows that it costs as much as 10 times more to recruit a new customer than to retain one you have already recruited.

7. Don't Accept Abuse. Don't accept it if a complainant steps over the line between the reasonable right to complain and outright personal abuse. Calmly explain that you will address problems, but you can do so only if he or she speaks and acts courteously and respectfully. If the complainant continues the abuse, terminate the conversation. You don't need that kind of customer!

8. Pin Down Moving Targets. If you're dealing with a problem that seems to grow every time you implement an agreed-upon solution, ask your customer to put the complaint in writing so you can better understand and address it. This will help you to focus upon an agreed-upon solution. Also, working things out on paper can sometimes help a complainant recognize if his is an unreasonable viewpoint.

9. Stop It from Happening Again. Try to prevent angering customers in the future with the following steps: At purchase time, let your customers know that it is your policy to resolve any difficulties they might encounter with their purchase. Then, should they call to complain, their stress levels should be a little lower given their confidence in receiving good support. Keep in touch. If something's about to happen that might upset customers, let them know before it's an issue. When a customer identifies a problem, change what you do to minimize the chance that the problem will recur.

Customers who take the time to complain are generally telling you that they want to continue doing business with you but with some changes. Put a high priority on resolving their difficulties, but don't ever feel you must sacrifice your own self-esteem to do so. **N**

For more information, contact John Caspole@AssessmentsSpecialists.com or visit <http://www.assessmentspecialists.com/about.html>. Profiles International, Waco, TX.

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