

LISTEN UP!

Handling difficult customers starts with listening

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Difficult customers. We all encounter them, and it can be very disheartening. It is true that we can't control the behaviours of our patients, but we can influence how they respond by our own actions.

Only 10% of conflict is due to a difference of opinion – 90% is due to the delivery and tone of voice used in the interaction. So, based on this statistic, we can manage these situations and even learn from them.

Here's how to proceed for the best possible outcome.



LISTEN

Practice active listening rather than passive listening. Active listening means concentrating on everything the customer is saying so that you clearly understand why they are upset. Passive listening means only absorbing part of the message and not paying full attention to the emotions behind their communication.

Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply. To ensure that you fully understand your customer, clarify or paraphrase



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what you believe you heard – it goes a long way and avoids trying to solve the wrong issue.

When dealing with written communication, read the customer's inquiry twice before you respond. Focus on the words they are communicating and not the anger behind their words.



SHOW EMPATHY

Empathy means you understand how they feel – whether or not you agree with them.

As you have difficult conversations with customers, showing empathy will help de-escalate the situation

and show the customer that you respect them and are listening to them.



THANK THEM

Thank them for bringing the concern forward and giving you a chance to resolve it.

I know this is the last thing you want to do, but the truth is, it's better that they bring a problem to you than telling 30 of their closest friends. I always say feedback is a gift, as it allows you to uncover opportunities to improve.

If it is clear that the situation requires an apology, do so in a sincere and authentic manner.



KEEP CALM

Maintaining a professional demeanor is essential, so it is important for anyone who deals with the public to learn not to let frustration get the better of them.

When dealing with an angry customer, it may be tempting to match their tone of voice. Yet this should be avoided at all costs, as it will only worsen the situation (remember the 90% statistic).

By remaining calm and keeping your voice low, the customer will be more likely to match your behaviour. Remember to breathe!

If you are dealing with written communication, proofread or review any response for aggressive language.



SAY THEIR NAME

“A person’s name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language.” This quote from Dale Carnegie, author of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, says it all.

Using the customer’s name shows you care. It is a sign of respect that acknowledges their “person-hood.” It also reminds the customer that you are a real person, too.

That said, do not overuse names; addressing someone by name too much can be awkward and may come across as phony.



BUILD TRUST

It is likely that the level of trust an angry customer has for your company has been damaged, and it is important to rebuild and maintain that trust moving forward.

Be honest and transparent with the customer. Give them a behind-the-scenes view of things, so perhaps they can even empathize with you.

Consider the following to build trust with a customer:

- Take responsibility for the mistake, using simple statements like “we messed up” and “this is completely our fault.”
- Use positive language like “Let me find out for you” instead of “I don’t know.” Also use words like yes, absolutely, certainly, etc.

customer’s anger personally; it often has nothing to do with them, and usually it’s about something going on personally for the customer.

Just because a customer is unhappy at the time does not mean they will stay that way. Your role is to give them an outlet to voice their opinion AND to listen to them. Once you resolve their issue, you will have a loyal customer for life.

The proof is in the pudding. While my son was working for a large grocery chain as a cashier, I came

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RESOLVE THE ISSUE

The primary goal when handling an angry customer is to resolve their issue. It may be as simple as asking what you can do to make it right for them.

If you discover that you cannot resolve the issue immediately, be honest with the customer. Set expectations with them so they know when their issue will be resolved. More importantly, meet those expectations – and if you can’t, let them know ahead of time so you don’t further damage the relationship.

When your staff has had to deal with a difficult situation, be supportive and give them time to process. Remind your staff not to take a

across a stack of comment cards. Customers had completed them in store and handed them in to customer service, who passed them along to my son.

Many were compliments about how helpful he was. Several customers said they had been upset when they came in, but he took the time to resolve the issue.

When I asked why he had not showed the cards to me, he said simply, “Oh, I get lots of those.” When I inquired about how he deals with angry customers, his response was, “I mostly just listen.”

Experiencing an angry customer, while unfortunate, is often unavoidable. Set your team up for success with proper training – or at the very least, teach them to just listen. **OP**

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