

Turning an Abusive Customer into a Raving Fan

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Out-of-control customers are the bane of customer service representatives. When someone swears at us, threatens us with bodily harm or promises to see us fired, our immediate reaction may be to disconnect or to transfer the caller to the manager. In fact, your company may already have specific policies for dealing with out-of-control customers. Our recommendation is that you make three attempts to work with the customer. If you are successful, you will find you have a raving fan for life. A very angry customer who has an issue resolved in a positive manner spreads the word. These people tell others. Pretty soon, everyone is talking about how seriously your organization takes satisfying their customers.

Step into their shoes

While it is easy to label abusive customers as lunatics, try to step into to their shoes for a while. How would you react to their situation? If you had been on hold for an hour, transferred from agent to agent or had another rep disconnect from you, wouldn't you be furious? Most of us wouldn't react in a calm manner either if we were losing thousands of dollars every minute a system was down or when defective products were returned. If you see the problem from the customer's eyes, it will help you to have the right attitude which is paramount to working with very angry customers.

Focus on the issues

It is also important to focus on the issues instead of your feelings. When someone is swearing

or shouting at us, many of us get swept up into the emotionalism of the situation and begin to defend ourselves. Remember that the person isn't angry at

you but the situation. Force yourself to focus on solving the problem so that you can be effective.

Consider what you say and how you say it

Let the first words out of your mouth be an apology or an acknowledgement on the part of your company for the customer's inconvenience or problem. Any acknowledgement needs to be specific to the particular situation. Saying "Ok" is not acceptable as an acknowledgement. Assure the customer over and over again that you will help them as quickly as possible. If you ask for invoice or policy numbers before the apology or acknowledgement, the customer's anger will continue to escalate. It will also continue to rise if the tone of your voice sounds flat or annoyed. On the other hand, if your customers see you are making a real attempt to help them and are sincere, typically, they will begin to calm down.

Let the customer ventilate. If you feel you can, ignore any fowl language the first few times. Paraphrase what you hear the customer saying. Ask the customer if you got the story correct and if anything has been left out. Do **not** tell the customer to "calm down" or interrupt to speed up the process. Continually, assure the customer you are working as fast as you can and documenting everything. Make sure you tell the person everything you are doing **and why**, even when inputting information in the computer. If appropriate, ask the customer for the best way to rectify the situation. If you can offer the customer free minutes of service, free shipping or any other consolation, it will go a long way.

If the swearing or abusive comments continue beyond a third time, address the customer by name and tell the person you realize how awful his/her situation is, but you are not in the habit of being spoken to in this manner. Tell the customer you would like to help *if* he/she can work with you in a positive manner. At this point you can also state that this may not be the best time for the customer to work through the problem. Offer the customer the option of calling back at your extension when they are ready. Ninety-nine per cent of the people do not want to risk any further delays so they will

Continued on page 2

apologize and change their behavior. However, if the unsettling comments continue, tell the customer you do want to help but right now the situation is too volatile to be productive and that you will have to disconnect.

Dealing with an abusive customer is hard, but it is the reality of our jobs. We make a mistake by being intimidated by customers who swear and shout. By being firm but sincere, by having the right attitude and watching our tone of voice and the way we phrase our comments, we can turn a bad situation around. Our ugliest customers will become raving fans.

Impact Communications, Inc. consults with individuals and businesses to improve their face-to-face and over the phone communication skills. It is not what you know but how you communicate it that makes a difference. To reach us, phone (847) 438-4480 or contact our web site, www.ImpactCommunicationsInc.com.