

Don't Take It Personally— Rule #1 with an Angry Caller

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Part of the job of any technical support, inside sales or customer service representative is to handle difficult callers. Depending upon the industry or wait time, some callers can be quite aggressive. They lash out at the rep almost immediately. The challenge for any phone rep, of course, is not to take these attacks personally, but rather to focus on clarifying the issues and resolving the problem.

It all begins with listening. However, all listening is not the same. There are many levels of listening, but the most detrimental is Judgmental. In Judgmental Listening, reps hear what the caller is saying while simultaneously deciding whether the caller's points are true, out-of-line or inappropriate. It is these judgment calls that cause reps to defend or react to the words on a personal level.

Eliminating this kind of listening demands work. A good starting point is to assess whether or not you routinely categorize and classify people. Are you constantly determining whether someone is right or wrong, smart or dumb, ugly or gorgeous? Is your language filled with qualifying statements, such as "he is so self-centered" or "she is so lazy?" If it is, it will be difficult for you to non-defensively react to attacking customers.

Instead of judging, determine to be an observer. While it is not easy to shed old habits and separate observations from evaluations, the payoff is worth the effort. Callers will notice when you think they are a "jerk." They will react negatively to your uncompassionate tone of voice or to a statement, such as "Don't take it out on me."

A person who is an observer cannot be an evaluator. A good observer takes notes on what the person states as facts and focuses on them, versus his own reactions. He notices feelings, whether they are expressed or hidden, through the tone of the caller's voice. When he hears them, he acknowledges them as sincerely as possible. With specific

acknowledgements, callers are encouraged to problem solve and trust the rep.

A good observer also listens without interruption. He does not simultaneously take a call, complete paper work or respond to someone outside of his cube. He also does not cut the person off to ask for account numbers, names and street addresses. He simply listens to uncover the facts as accurately as possible.

Then, and only then, does the rep respond—but as an observer, rather than a judge.

Instead of the old habitual, defensive response of, for example, "It's not our fault. It's the freight company's error," the phone rep reframes his approach to focus on fixing the problem.

Marshall Rosenberg in his book, "Non-violent Communication- A Language of Life," states that when someone gives us a negative message, we have four options as to how to receive it: 1) We can blame ourselves. 2) We can blame others. 3) We can focus on how we feel and what we need. 4) We can focus on what the other person feels and needs. Rosenberg says that when we focus on what the other person feels and needs, we can be the most effective. Instead of reacting and taking the message personally, we can plan a response that protects the relationship, and satisfies the customer.

Epictetus once said, "People are disturbed not by things, but by the view they take of them." The more we hear our customers, the more they will hear us.

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