

Calming the Difficult Customer

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One bad phone call with an emotional customer risks losing a valuable account. While intuitively, every call center representative knows the importance of protecting the relationship with a customer, it is very difficult being warm and friendly to a customer who is rude and threatening. Seven, solid suggestions for whipping even the most cantankerous caller in line are the following:

1. Behave professionally. Do not take insults personally. Usually, it is not the rep with whom the customer is angry. It might be the long wait to talk to a live person, a company's difficult phone system or a reoccurring delivery problem that predisposes the person to being upset before even talking to a customer service representative. Separating oneself from the customer's emotionalism and focusing on resolving the issue is critical. An overlooked fact is that often the rep's attitude has more impact on the customer than fixing the problem. The nicer the rep, the more the caller is willing to problem solve.

2. Just listen. Do not interrupt or rush the caller. While it is important to resolve the customer's problem quickly, the customer wants to tell his whole story so reps should just listen until the customer is finished. No one likes being cut off with questions about an account number, etc.

3. Show understanding. Callers want the rep to appreciate their inconvenience or loss of revenue due to the late delivery, etc. A good way to demonstrate understanding is by acknowledging or apologizing. The more specific the acknowledgment, the more the customer believes that the rep understands. The word "ok" is not an acknowledgment. Any acknowledgment should not be followed with "but" or "however." It undoes what was just said. Taking responsibility for the issue by apologizing eliminates the need for the customer to become unreasonable. It is often as important as why the situation occurred in the first place, and it focuses the customer on resolution.

4. Ask questions. Callers appreciate it when the rep continues to clarify the situation. It moves the conversation forward and keeps the conversation on the right track. However, the caller will notice if the rep asks for information that has already been given. It is always a good idea to take notes while the customer is talking. Reps should also say "please" and "thank you" for any information being solicited.

5. Verify information. Before suggesting a solution, reps need to be sure. Paraphrasing what has been said lets the customer conclude that the rep has been listening and fully understands the problem.

6. Fix the problem. When offering a solution, tone of voice is important. So is positive, proactive language. People only want to hear what reps can do for them, not what they can't. If the customer makes unreasonable demands or if an immediate remedy isn't possible, the rep should rephrase and repeat the solution as positively as possible and again apologize for any inconvenience. If the rep remains calm and demonstrates sincerity, the message eventually gets accepted. Customers know not every problem can be fixed instantly or to their benefit. With a caller who continues to remain dissatisfied, it is a good idea to ask what can be done to make the customer happy. Often, it is something minimal. In the end, most customers are reasonable people.

7. Thank the customer and finish the conversation without rushing. People feel valued and appreciated when a rep thanks them for their business and when the rep asks if there is anything more that the rep can do for them. Reps should always end the conversation when the customer initiates closure but not before.

The success of any company depends on effectively dealing with upset customers. When customers feel in times of distress that they have been treated with the utmost respect, they remain loyal and recommend the organization to others. Paying attention to these seven suggestions is the key.

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