

Ways to Put Out the Fire— Six Steps to Managing Angry Callers

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When an angry caller lashes out, as call center representatives, we want to put out the fire as quickly as possible. Most customers are difficult because of the situation, not us. Perhaps, they have been in cue for a long time, or they have a reoccurring problem. If you were in their shoes, you would have smoke coming out of your ears also. By focusing on the issue under discussion, and not on you and your feelings, you will be able to treat your customers in a courteous, professional manner. The following are six, easy steps for turning a bad situation into a win-win.

Step One: Just Listen. Let your customers vent.

Do not interrupt or rush angry callers. People who are upset want to tell you what happened and how wronged they feel at their own pace. Many reps make the mistake of asking customers for information before callers are finished describing the problem. It only escalates the issue.

As you listen, try to identify central ideas, as well as specific facts. This takes complete concentration because many upset customers are not necessarily logical. Pay attention to any conversational subtitles, like how quickly the caller is speaking and the points he or she is emphasizing.

While the customer is talking, take notes. It will save you from asking the caller to repeat information, and it will demonstrate that you have been actively listening. Consciously, keep an open mind. Avoid judging motives or analyzing. Your job is not to be a psychiatrist.

Step Two: Deal with the customer's emotions.

Empathize with them by acknowledging or apologizing.

Once you know how the person feels, acknowledge it as sincerely as possible. When an upset person hears you acknowledge or apologize for the inconvenience or the problem, the person feels you understand and, thus, is more receptive to your suggestions for solving the problem.

When you acknowledge or apologize, you are not accepting blame on a personal level, but rather, apologizing for any inconvenience your company caused. Acknowledgements work best at the beginning of the call when you first get a sense that the customer is upset or has a problem. This means avoiding the temptation to immediately launch into fact-finding.

Acknowledgements that are meaningful are specific. The more specific the acknowledgement, the more the customer feels you understand. "Okay" is not sufficient, nor is "I understand." Both leave the customer wondering what exactly you do understand. Strong, specific acknowledgements are never followed by "but" or "however." It negates what you have just said.

Step Three: Don't assume. Ask questions.

Ask questions to verify and make sure that you have heard all of the facts or issues. Do not make assumptions. When possible ask open-ended questions. They force your customer to talk and they help you to uncover hidden needs, assumptions and problems.

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Be careful not to ask too many questions or the same question more than once. Customers begin to feel like they are being interrogated. If you attach a benefit to the question, most customers will not be resistant to disclosing the requested information. Finally, be respectful and say "please."

**Step 4:
Paraphrase what you hear.**

Once you have asked questions, it is important to verify that what you have heard is accurate. Paraphrasing demonstrates that you don't want to miss anything. It also gives the customer a chance to correct or add information. It makes the caller feel more in control.

When you paraphrase, it can sound phony or mechanical. Be sure to use a variety of expressions so that you are perceived as genuine and sincere.

**Step 5:
Problem solve by offering
the customer alternatives.**

Once you understand the problem, obviously the caller expects you to fix it. As much as possible, involve your customers in the solution. Ask for their input. What would they like to see happen?

There are some customers that try to take advantage, but most do not. If you can be flexible on policies or deadlines, the customer will be impressed and feel you have gone out of your way to fix issues. However, when problem solving, it is important to educate your customer so that he knows how to avoid similar situations in the future.

Make sure you phrase your solution clearly and concisely. When customers are upset, they do not hear all of what you say. The more concise your comments, the better it is.

Also, be sure to frame negative information as positively as possible. Instead of telling a customer what you can't do, stress what you can do. At all costs avoid ordering, defending, belittling or arguing. The conversation will only spiral downward.

Focus on solutions and not on laying blame. No one wants a lecture. Regardless of how customers treat you, they want to be treated with respect.

**Step Six:
Summarize and follow through
on all promises.**

It is important to end each call on a positive note. It is the last thing the customer will remember. Even if you have already done so, review what you will do and what the customer must do to solve the problem. This will insure that the customer is not expecting anything different than what has been discussed.

Finally, thank the customer and ask if there are additional things that you can do for them before you end the call. It demonstrates that you care about their satisfaction. It cements the relationship and will help when future issues crop up.

Final thoughts:

If you resolve the problem, you satisfy your customers, but you do not impress them. It takes more. Consider what else you can do to compensate the customer for his inconvenience but under-promise and over-deliver.

Impact Communications, Inc. consults with individuals and businesses to improve their face-to-face and over the phone communication skills. When you have to have impact, phone (847) 438-4480 or visit our web site, www.ImpactCommunicationsInc.com.