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Dealing with Difficult Customers

By Dave Kahle

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It is easy to work with people you like, and it is even easier to work with people who like you. But that's not always the case. Sooner or later, you'll have to deal with a difficult customer.

Difficult customers come in a wide variety. There are those whose personality rubs you the wrong way. They may not be difficult for someone else, but they are for you. And then there are those who are difficult for everyone: Picky people, know-it-alls, egocentrics, fault-finders, constant complainers, etc. Every salesperson can list a number of the types.

But perhaps the most difficult for everyone is the angry customer. This is someone who feels that he or she has been wronged, and is upset and emotional about it. These customers complain, and they are angry about something you or your company did.

There are some sound business reasons to become adept in handling an angry customer. Research indicates that customers who complain are likely to continue doing business with your company if they feel that they were treated properly. It's estimated that as many as 90% of customers who perceive themselves as having been wronged never complain, they just take their business elsewhere. So, angry, complaining customers care enough to talk to you, and have not yet decided to take their business to the competition. They are customers worth saving.

Not only are there benefits to your company, but you personally gain as well. Become adept at handling angry customers, and you'll feel much more confident in your own abilities. If you can handle this, you can handle anything. While any one can work with the easy people, it takes a real professional to be successful with the difficult customers. Your confidence will grow, your poise will increase, and your self-esteem will intensify.

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On the other hand, if you mishandle it, and you'll watch the situation dissolve into lost business and upset people. You may find yourself upset for days.

So, how do you handle an angry, complaining customer? Let's begin with a couple tools you can use in these situations.

1. **RESPECT.** It can be difficult to respect a person who may be yelling, swearing or behaving like a two-year-old. I'm not suggesting you respect the behavior, only that you respect the person. Keep in mind that 99 times out of 100 you are not the object of the customer's anger. You are like a small tree in the path of a swirling tornado. But unlike the small tree, you have the power to withstand the wind.

What is the source of your power? Unlike the customer, you are not angry, you are in control, and your

only problem at the moment is helping him with his problem. If you step out of this positioning, and start reacting to the customer in an emotional way, you'll lose control, you'll lose your power, and the situation will be likely to escalate into a lose-lose for everyone. So, begin with a mindset that says, "No matter what, I will respect the customer."

2. **EMPATHY.** Put yourself in the customer's shoes, and try to see the situation from his/her perspective. Don't try and cut him off, don't urge him to calm down. Instead, listen carefully. If someone is angry or upset, it is because that person feels injured in some way. Your job is to let the customer vent and to listen attentively in order to understand the source of that frustration. When you do that, you send a powerful unspoken message that you care about him and his situation.

Often, as the customer comes to realize that you really do care and that you are going to attempt to help him resolve the problem, the customer will calm down on his own, and begin to interact with you in a positive way.

Here's how you can use these two tools in an easily-remembered process for dealing with angry customers.

CRACK THE EGG

Image that you have a hard-boiled egg. The rich yellow yolk at the center of the egg represents the solution to the customer's problem, the hardened white which surrounds the yolk represents the details of the customer's situation, and the hard shell represents his/her anger.

In order to get to the yolk, and resolve the situation, you must first crack the shell. In other words, you have got to penetrate the customer's anger. Then you've got to cut through the congealed egg white. That means that you understand the details of the customer's situation. Finally, you're at the heart of the situation, where you can offer a solution to the customer's problem.

So, handling an angry customer is like cutting through a hard-boiled egg. Here's a four-step process to help you do so.

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1. LISTEN.

Let's say you stop to see one of your regular customers. He doesn't even give you time to finish your greeting before he launches into a tirade.

At this point, about all you can do is LISTEN. And that's what you do. You don't try and cut him off, you don't urge him to calm down. Not just yet. Instead, you listen carefully. And as you listen, you begin to piece together his story. He ordered a piece of equipment three weeks ago. You quoted him X price and delivery by last Friday for a project that's starting this week. Not only is the equipment not there, but he received an invoice for it at a different price than was quoted.

"What kind of shoddy operation is this?" he wants to know. Do you understand how important his project is? Do you know how much time and money is at stake? If he doesn't get his equipment and something happens to this project, you're going to pay for it. He knew, he just knew he should have ordered the equipment from your competitor. What are you going to do about it?

Now you have the basic story. Hopefully, after this gush of frustration, there will be a pause while he comes up for air.

More often than not, once the customer has had an initial chance to vent his rage, it's going to die down a little, and that's your opportunity to take step in.

Even if he has started calming down on his own, there comes a moment – and I can almost guarantee you'll sense it – to help calm him down. Try something along the lines of: "It sounds like something has gone wrong, and I can understand your frustration. I'm sorry you're experiencing this problem. Let's take a look at the next step."

Try to calm yourself first, and then to acknowledge his feelings. Say, "I can tell you're upset..." or, "It sounds like you're angry..." then connect to the customer by apologizing, or empathizing. When you say something like "I'm sorry that happened. If I were you, I'd be frustrated, too." It's amazing how much of a calming effect that can have.

Remember, anger is a natural, self-defensive reaction to a perceived wrong. If there is a problem with your company's product or service, some frustration and disappointment is justified.

This is so important, let me repeat it. First you listen carefully and completely to the customer. Then you empathize with what the customer is feeling, and let him or her know that you understand. This will almost always calm the customer down. You've cracked the shell of the egg. Now, you can proceed to deal with the problem.

2. IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM.

Sometimes while the angry customer is venting, you'll be able to latch right on to the problem because it's clear-cut. Something is broken. Or late. Or he thinks a promise has been broken.

But sometimes in the middle of all that rage, it's tough to comprehend the bottom-line issue. This is a good place for some specific questions. Ask the customer to give you some details. "What day did he

order it, when exactly was it promised. What is his situation at the moment?" These kind of questions force the customer to think about facts instead of his/her feelings about those facts. So, you interject a more rational kind of conversation. Think of this step of the process as cutting through the white of the egg to get to the yolk at the center.

It's important, when you think you understand the details, to restate the problem. You can say, "Let me see if I have this right. You were promised delivery last Friday, because you need it for an important project this coming week. But you haven't received our product yet. Is that correct?"

He will probably acknowledge that you've sized up the situation correctly. Or, he may say, "No, that's not right" and then proceed to explain further. In either case the outcome is good, because you will eventually understand his situation correctly, and have him tell you that "Yes, that's right."

And at that point you can apologize. Some people believe that an apology is an acknowledgment of wrongdoing. But you can appreciate and apologize for the customer's inconvenience without pointing fingers. Just say, "Mr. Brady, I'm sorry this has happened." Or "Mr. Brady, I understand this must be very frustrating. Let's just see what we can do fix it, OK?"

3. AVOID BLAME.

You don't want to blame the customer by saying something like "Are you sure you understood the price and delivery date correctly?" This will just ignite his anger all over again because you are questioning his credibility and truth-telling.

And you don't want to blame your company or your suppliers. Never say, "I'm not surprised your invoice was wrong. It's been happening a lot." Or, "Yes, our backorders are way behind."

In general, you AVOID BLAME. Which is different than acknowledging responsibility. For example, if you know, for a fact, a mistake has been made, you can acknowledge it and apologize for it. "Mr. Brady, clearly there's a problem here with our performance. I can't change that, but let me see what I can do to help you out because I understand how important your project is."

4. RESOLVE THE PROBLEM.

Now you're at the heart of the egg. You won't always be able to fix the problem perfectly. And you may need more time than a single phone call. But it's critical to leave the irate customer with the understanding that your goal is to resolve the problem. You may need to say, "I'm going to need to make some phone calls." If you do, give the customer an idea of when you'll get back to him: "Later this afternoon." Or "First thing in the morning."

Then do it. Make the phone calls. Get the information. Find out what you can do for this customer and do it. Then follow up with the customer when you said you would. Even if you don't have all the information you need, call when you said you would and at least let him know what you've done, what you're working on and what your next step will be. Let the customer know that he and his business are important to you, that you understand his frustration, and that you're working hard to get things fixed.

Use the tools of respect and empathy, and the "crack the egg" process, and you'll move your

professionalism up a notch. ###

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Caring for Your Customers

By Terri Seymour

You probably think I am going to say something like, "The customer is always right." Right?? Wrong.

I have many philosophies when dealing with customers, but I definitely do not believe that the customer is always right. However, when the customer is wrong, you must handle the situation delicately.

There are many types of customers and each one needs to be treated with respect and consideration no matter how difficult they may be. I have found that most (not all) people can be soothed out of their "nastiness".

I used to work at our local casino and I would get all kinds of customers to deal with. Most of them were very pleasant as in the IM business, but there were a few that were very difficult. There was this one night when I came in contact with this particularly difficult lady who, of course, was having bad luck. She was just a bit**in" and blaming the casino!!

I calmly yet firmly talked to her in a reassuring and respectful manner each and every time I came around. I noticed that each time I did talk to her she became more and more relaxed and controlled. Until finally, later in the evening, I went into the Ladies Room and who should be there, but the difficult

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lady! Well, as I came in, she burst out, " There she is. There's that girl who was so nice to me all night long and made me feel so much better"! She could not have been more grateful. ;—)

Now this will not happen everytime you run into a difficult customer, but it could happen often. Treat people with respect, kindness and consideration and more often then not, you will be able to calm down a dissatisfied, belligerent customer. Listen to the customer and let them know you will do everything possible to get the problem resolved. Show them that you care!

You need to actually care about your customer and care about making sure they are satisfied with you and your service and/or product. Do not just think of the customer as another sale.

If you get the eternally nasty customer who will not be consoled no matter what you do, do not lose control or sink to their level. Remain calm but firm. The customer is not always right no matter how much they think they are. Be courteous and polite.

Since I have been online, I have only encountered about three customers of the eternally nasty type. ;—) I did my best, but to no avail. So I had no choice but to send them on their way. I stood up for myself and for MOE and did not insult them in any way. But as we know, there is just no pleasing some people.

I would say that 99% of the people I have encountered online have been absolutely wonderful! They make it easy to treat them with respect and courtesy. I, who has been painfully shy most of my life, love working with people and enjoy interacting with them online and offline. I think all (well, almost all)

people are good in one way or another and deserve to be treated as such.

This is why I do business by the motto: Treat others as you would like to be treated and Be true to yourself and your customers!

Terri Seymour owns and operates

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Caring for Your Customers

Difficult customers – there's no such thing

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