

# Handling Customers.. Like a Boss!

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## Key Points in Managing Customers

### 1. Know customers expectations before they call or walk through the door

Knowing what customers want ahead of time is the main way to prevent complaints in the first place. Customers want the same thing you want first and foremost when you frequent an establishment: *respect*. Customer expectations are everything, and if they feel underappreciated or devalued, you may very well lose that business forever (in addition to the negative word of mouth that undoubtedly spreads to countless others, made worse through the use of social media).

Always offer basic courtesies to even the most problematic customers (we don't need any lawsuits anyone!). Know your companies' protocol, mission, and overall vision to be portrayed to visitors. Other customer "needs" to consider:

- Competent, friendly, efficient service ("Hello? Can anybody hear me in this store? Where did everybody go?")
- Value of what's paid for (\$8.50 side salad with no cheese or veggies- c'mon!)
- Anticipation of needs ahead of time
- To be listened to (and heard)
- Not to be passed around (this is especially true for phone calls, and boy I still despise those lengthy, computer answering phone systems when I just need a human voice)

*NOTE: Knowing the above pointers will help you prepare for all of the different types of customers that come in, and assists in avoiding most complainers in the first place. However, there is always going to be the one customer who, no matter what, will find, or even invent, something to complain about. While we should constantly strive for ideal customer relations, the reality is to be prepared and not caught off guard when we DO eventually encounter the "complainer". Take several deep breaths, and once again be reminded that bad choices, even at work, usually come with bad consequences attached.*

### 2. View all complaints as beneficial to the organization

This can be grueling, and does require you to at times sacrifice your self-image to the deeper commitment of company vision and standards, at least while at work. Back at home, you can scream, yell, vent, or whatever your stress-reliever is, even if not always positive. At work though, we must remain calm and paint the prettiest of pictures always, which is next to impossible at times.

There is a Golden Rule to respect in these type of situations: **DO acknowledge the customer and their problem, let them know you clearly understand what they are explaining to you, and always at the end be clear in offering up a solution in which both the customer and business can mutually agree upon** (don't offer exaggerated freebies, discounts, etc. overly commensurate than the complaint). Let the customer become a partner in the solution process. Show you care, actually thank them for bringing the problem to your attention, and don't get defensive (people release ill will when they talk).

**DON'T** ever make excuses, offer alternative businesses providing the same product as yours, ignore the customer altogether, or treat them badly. Remember complaints should be seen as an opportunity by the business to retain that relationship, and perhaps others with the same concerns that just don't voice them to the organization. These "complainers" want to know the business is acknowledging and rectifying their plea of a situation gone poorly, or that hasn't quite lived up to their ideal expectations (even if unrealistic- "dream vacation" gone wrong anyone?).

### 3. Don't take it personally

It can be hard when a customer is right in your face. All joking aside, we must remain in the third-person when dealing with hardcore customers. When the situation arises, you are now the representative "face" of the business. Really bad experiences can "scar" that individual's image of your company for the rest of their life (and yes, they'll remember every bit of the bad experience, including your face).

The trick is to flip this same philosophy on its head and know that yes, **I AM** the face and voice of my company to this, and really all, customers, and need to follow procedures and protocol in all situations, especially the difficult ones. If need be, get a manager involved. If you are the manager, use extraordinary patience, patience, patience! Like you yourself would want, keep an open understanding ear, and don't attempt to "override" the customer (talk over them, etc.), or "shush" them on their way out the door or off the phone.

Even if the customer gets personal against you, absolutely **DO NOT** get aggressive in return! As you are already all too aware, some folks are just looking for that sort of rise to get out of someone. When you react this way, it's getting personal, which leaves a lot more to be desired by the customer, and actually gives them more to attack and to feed their negative energy with. You **ARE** good at your job, even if you have to recognize and accept customers too have bad days once in a while.

### 4. Different types of complainers require different strategies

We can prevent most complaints with offering great customer service right off the bat, but we also understand that each situation, and customer, is unique. Therefore, so are complainers. Here are some of the most common:

- Individuals with ruined dreams (the reality doesn't match what they had as a fantasy in their mind)
- Freebie-lovers (these types love saving money and can be rip-off artists)
- The quiet complainer (they won't say anything at the store, but boy, they'll tell everyone they know back at home just how awful your business is)
- Aggressive complainer (loud, obnoxious- everyone in the immediate vicinity will **KNOW** something is amiss, which is bad for business)
- Chronic complainer (we all need repeat business as 80% of business comes from our top 20% of customers, but this person always has something negative to bring up once in the store)

*NOTE: Knowing the different types of complainers is useful in pre-identifying what makes them tick. Adopt to each accordingly. Prepare responses for each scenario in your mind, and stress to yourself that freebie-lovers should only receive back the value of the complaint (and only if it's a "real" issue); with the aggressive type you can't cave-in by taking it personally and attacking them back. Chronic require the utmost patience (never tell them to take their business elsewhere as they **DO** like your company and offerings- it's just their personality-type).*

Although not to a be-all-end-all for dealing with customers and their complaints, I hope you were able to think a little deeper this month about who's paying your paycheck. It's really the customers, and we take the proverbial pledge that "the customer is always right", even when we know their not.

If you win the fight (and does it matter if you are right, really?), you'll lose the customer. You can be right or you can have empathy, but you can't do both. Customer service goes beyond a smile. It's about work, people, processes, coping techniques, and even additional training if necessary. If something does go wrong, which it inevitably will, IMMEDIATE service recovery is vital to repair the situation. Bring out the best in even the worst offender, don't react negative to negative situations, and you might just make it through the busy season to 2013 in one piece.

*NOTE: I too can be an "over-apologizer myself with customers, which is fine in most scenarios. However, in cases of a customer saying they were **injured or are ill** because of the business, **DO NOT APOLOGIZE!** It can be used against the company in court as an admission of guilt.*

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