

Don't Run From Complaining Customers

SOLVE THEIR PROBLEMS AND YOU WILL BUILD CUSTOMER LOYALTY

"I am so sorry. Let me change your delivery date so we can schedule it for when you do not have to take time off work. Would you like me to pick up your old appliance while we are there? Is there anything else I can do to help you?"

I was shocked at this exchange between a retail store and its customer. Why? Because it is so rare that an employee of any business will actually apologize for a mistake, take responsibility for it, and correct it—all within a matter of one minute. And yet, that is exactly what should occur when attempting to provide the best possible service to a customer.

Let me give you an example of how not to handle a complaint. I recently had a problem with my new refrigerator. I called the retail chain that sold the appliance and got tired of them every 30 days having to come out and fix the same thing. The ice dispenser freezes up if you use crushed ice. I also called the CEO of the company to discuss this lemon and his staff said there was nothing wrong with this model. What did that company do? NOTHING. They never solved my problem or even cared. What was the result? I no longer will be their customer.

When a customer complains, you should be grateful. Why? Because that customer is giving you the opportunity to make things right, and to retain their business. Research shows that only about 4 percent of customers will tell you when they have a problem. The other 96 percent simply won't do business with you again. Instead, they quietly fume and take their business—and their money—elsewhere. They also will tell an average of 10 other people about the problem they had with your organization.

Handling customer complaints is a critical element in providing exceptional service. It's also one aspect of any job that employees fear and, consequently, mishandle. The reason is twofold: They take complaints personally, and they haven't been trained in how to deal with irate customers. In fact, many employees quit their jobs because they don't like—and don't know how—to deal with complaining customers. When employees are trained to deal with complaints, the organization wins on two fronts. It not only retains its customers, it retains its employees.

When handling complaints, employees can win customers' loyalty by following these six steps:

Listen carefully and with interest to what the customer

has to say. Don't get defensive, either with your words or your body language. Remember that the customer is not attacking you personally; he is merely describing the problem and hoping you can solve it.

Put yourself in the customer's place. Make responses that show you care about the customer's problem. You might say, "I don't blame you for being upset." When you show empathy for a customer's situation, you defuse the situation and have a calming influence on the customer. Never directly challenge the customer. Even if the customer is wrong and you're right, don't attempt to prove it. The goal is to solve the problem, not debate who is at fault.

Ask questions in a caring, concerned manner. The more information you have, the better armed you will be to solve the problem to the customer's satisfaction.

Suggest one or more alternatives to address the customer's concerns. Ask the customer what she feels would be an appropriate solution then make some suggestions on your own. Become a partner with the customer in solving the problem.

Apologize without blaming. Nothing defuses a potentially volatile situation better than a sincere apology. When a customer sees—and hears—that you are sorry for the problem he is experiencing, he will respond in a like manner. Don't participate in fault-finding.

Solve the problem or find someone who can solve it. When complaints are solved quickly, it saves the organization money because, every time a complaint is moved up the ladder, it becomes more expensive to handle again. **RO**

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