

## IF YOU CAN'T SAY SOMETHING NICE ABOUT CUSTOMER SERVICE... **COMPLAIN!**

**W**e in the customer service industry cannot avoid complaints. Complaints are a daily feature of our working lives, and when a customer complains it's usually for a good reason, based on a genuine concern. They've made a purchase that didn't meet their expectations: a product, service, or perhaps a combination of the two. We must take care of our customers by listening to their complaints and resolving them, if we want to gain happy customers.

Here's something worth considering. Fewer than half of our unhappy customers will ever bring a complaint to our attention. Yet those who say nothing will tell an average of at least 11 people about their bad experience! Thus, it's vital that we recognize complaints as opportunities to sway the averages, one resolved complaint at a time. It's my belief that no transaction is ever complete until the service we give the customer motivates them to return and do business with us again.

Customers want to know that someone is listening and that they are being understood. They are hoping you'll be willing to take care of the problem to their satisfaction. When a customer brings an issue to your attention, even if they do it in a less-than-pleasant way, the wisest response is to be thankful. We must realize that inept or improper handling of a customer complaint can be very costly to our business.

### HANDLE CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS IN A SMOOTH PROFESSIONAL MANNER

When something goes wrong, how can you take the customer from hell to heaven in 60 seconds? The solution is to empower and reward your employees for solving problems quickly and to the customer's satisfaction.

Even a small gesture of apology can turn a bad situation into a good one. Simply following up with a phone call can create priceless goodwill. And the cost could be minimal, maybe no more than the simple promise of an upgrade on the customer's next purchase, or a welcome gift certificate. Simple gestures like these can create overhappy customers! Resolving customer complaints successfully will help you understand their needs, turn them into loyal customers, and grow your business.

I have written about Stew Leonard for more than 25 years. Stew Jr. placed a huge 6,000-pound rock in front of the family store, inscribed with two rules:

**Rule 1:** The customer is always right!

**Rule 2:** If the customer is ever wrong, reread Rule 1.

The company has received worldwide attention for the excellence of its customer service and the quality of its goods. It's been featured in two books by management expert Tom Peters: *A Passion for Excellence* and *Thriving on Chaos*. In 1992, the Stew Leonard's store earned an entry in Guinness World Records for having "the greatest sales per unit area of any single food store in the United States."

In my book *The Customer is Boss*, I show you how to "complain correctly." Most people begin their complaint by criticizing the person they are complaining to. Not a good idea! If you complain about the person at the bottom, they surely will not send your criticisms up to management to demonstrate what a terrible job they're doing with handling complaints.

I tell people that they have a right to a good experience, a quality product, and top-of-the-line service. I also tell them it's their responsibility to advise the appropriate channels when there's an issue.

You deserve quality and top-notch performance. Here are a couple of things that work very well whenever you're trying to motivate a business to give you better customer service:

- **Ask for good service**—"I really need your help."
- **Act as if you expect good service.**
- **Treat salespeople as friends**—A friendly attitude toward salespeople is so rare that sales clerks will jump to attention and give you celebrity service when you treat them with respect.
- **Change your attitudes around the area of good service**—Your chances of receiving good service improve immensely when you make it known that you expect it. Speak up!
- **State your expectations clearly; ask for a speedy resolution.**
- **Finally, don't feel sorry** for the business, the government agency, or the non-profit group when you complain about bad service—you're doing them a big favor by complaining!

Complaints are good for business—so don't shut up, speak up. **RO**

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