A strategy for dealing with angry customers

One of the functional areas of Business and Finance that I support is Parking and Transit Services. The department has been conducting an ongoing customer feedback survey since 2008 and has received more than 10,000 responses. A very large number of these responses are positive notes from customers saying thank you for providing good service; however, not every customer is happy with the service they have received. I was reviewing this survey information, and it started me thinking about how a person can effectively work with an unhappy or angry customer and try to turn the situation into a positive one.

Ideally, our processes and employee training will make service failures a rare occurrence, but even with the best processes in place, there is a chance that we will not give the customer what they need, or make a mistake. When this happens, the customer will not be satisfied with the outcome, and you will need to take steps to fix the situation. It is not easy helping someone who is unhappy; but as long as you approach the situation seriously and do not take the customer’s frustration personally, there are some strategies that you can apply to successfully address the situation and help the customer.

Defuse the situation

When a customer is angry, the first thing you will want to do is make sure the customer does not become further upset because of their interaction with you, and you will want to employ strategies that help them calm down. To do this, take the following steps:

- **Let the customer talk.** When customers are unhappy, they often want to vent their frustrations and have someone just listen to them. The best thing to do in this situation is to let the customer speak their mind. While they are talking, make sure you are actively listening to what they have to say and are taking notes. This will demonstrate that what the customer is saying is important to you, and having notes means that you will not need to ask them to repeat themselves.

- **Acknowledge the problem and apologize if the issue was due to your mistake.** Denying a problem exists or minimizing a situation is not a good strategy, even if the issue is minor. To an upset customer, the issue is serious, and they want you to take it seriously too. By acknowledging the problem, you are reinforcing that you have heard and understood what they have just told you, and you consider the issue as important as they do. If the problem was caused because of a mistake you made when helping them, apologize for the situation.

- **Take ownership of the problem.** When a customer is unhappy, few things frustrate them more than being passed from one person to another. Whenever
possible, take responsibility for fixing the situation for them. Tell them you will help them. Repeat your understanding of the issue as they have explained it to you, to ensure that you do understand what they have said. Then let them know that you will be their point of contact, and will work on their behalf to find a solution to the issue.

- **Keep the customer focused on the facts, not emotions.** When a person gets upset, emotions start taking over, they begin losing objectivity, and they start speculating about what happened and why. For example, they might claim that the person who helped them is poorly trained, is dumb, or intentionally provided poor service. This is just the customer venting their frustration. Speculating about what might have caused the situation, attempting to defend your coworkers, or refuting the customer’s statements is not going to solve the problem. Do not let the customer pull you into an emotional conversation, as it will just add fuel to an already volatile situation. Redirect the conversation with a statement like “I understand you are frustrated with the service you received, let’s focus on fixing the issue.”

- **Stay calm and do not take things personally.** As a part of focusing on facts and avoiding emotion, make sure you keep calm. If you become emotional or angry with the customer, then the interaction could spiral out of control as your emotions feed off each other. If you stay calm and do not take things personally, it will help calm the customer. If you are clearly listening, letting them vent and focusing on the facts, you are not fueling their emotions, but are letting them dissipate. Eventually, the customer will start to run out of steam, and the situation will deescalate.

- **Keep a positive attitude and show sincere empathy for the customer’s situation.** As a part of your interactions, make sure you keep a confident and positive attitude that you can help the customer and are willing to work with them. View the situation from the customer’s perspective and be empathetic toward them, but do so in a way that does not sound insincere or scripted. Your tone of voice will play a key role in conveying positivity and sincerity. If you speak in a monotone, speak at too rapid a pace or mumble responses, the customer will not perceive your words to be positive or sincere. It just sounds like you are repeating a scripted statement. Think of it this way: if you were an unhappy customer and the person you were speaking with said, “I am sorry this has happened to you and I can see you are frustrated but I will be happy to fix this for you,” in a rapid monotone, you would perceive that to be a scripted statement. If
they said the same thing with some energy and inflection in their voice and paused after the apology, you would perceive it as a more sincere statement.

**Take time to understand the situation**

Customers want results quickly, and an unhappy customer is no exception. That said, after the customer has had a chance to vent and tell their side of the story, you must take the time to ensure you understand the issue completely. This might take a few seconds or a couple of hours, but you need to have a balanced picture of what happened. To do this, take the following steps:

- **Follow-up with the customer.** If it is going to take some time to research the issue, make sure you let the customer know that you will be their point of contact. Give them an estimate of how long you think it will take to get the information you need and then make sure you follow-up when you say you will. Even if you are only able to let the customer know that you are still working on a solution, make sure you keep your word. Failing to do this will just make them angrier and distrust you.

- **Review all available documentation.** Look at any relevant documentation provided by the customer and departmental documentation (on paper or stored electronically). Use this information to develop a picture of the original interaction with the customer, what they initially asked for, and the service delivered to them.

- **Talk with the people involved.** If you were not the person who originally helped the customer, then whenever possible you should talk with the person who did. Like the documentation review, this will further help you develop a clear picture of the service that was provided, and give you insight into what may have caused the issue the customer is experiencing.

- **Review relevant policies.** Ensure you understand the role university or department policies play in the issue. There may be some policies or other constraints that had an impact on how the service was provided to the customer.

- **Determine what the customer needs from the service interaction.** Look at what the customer originally requested. Determine if what they are now asking for is the same as what they initially said they wanted. If there is a difference, did the customer get what they needed the first time and are now coming back with different expectations?
- **Consider the available options.** Customers like to have options. After examining what occurred to create the issue, determine what options may be available to address the customer’s needs, and that will help them get what they are seeking.

### Addressing the problem

After you have developed a picture of what occurred, what the customer wants, and what options you can provide, it is time to work with the customer to solve the problem. Remember to keep calm and positive as you speak with the customer. To solve the problem, take the following steps:

- **Apologize appropriately.** When the department or an employee has not met expectations and has caused problems for the customer, it is appropriate to provide a simple, sincere apology for inconveniencing them. You do not need to go overboard here, as that may not be viewed as sincere. It should also be noted that not every situation requires an apology. There are times when the customer is responsible for the issue they are experiencing. In these cases, you (or your department) do not need to apologize. Simply acknowledging that the situation is not what it needs to be and assuring the customer that you can help them is sufficient.

- **Briefly explain what happened.** Summarize what you have found through your research. Like before, you want to focus on the facts and avoid emotion. Do not point fingers, place blame or quote policy. What happened is in the past. Focus on fixing the customer’s situation. Any other information can be used at a later point to ensure the same issue does not occur again.

- **Tell the customer what you can do for them.** At this point, you want to confidently, clearly, and specifically explain the options that are available to address the issue. Make sure to describe what can be done for the customer, why these are the available options, who will help them, and when they can expect the service to be complete. Use terms that focus on the outcomes the customer will receive (their time, their money, their classes, their degree program, etc.) If you only have one course of action, state that fact and explain why there are no other options available.

- **Check for agreement.** After providing options, ask the customer which they would prefer. Ensure they accept what is being offered, and that you are both clear on what the next steps will be. If there is only one course of action
available, you still want to ensure the customer is clear about next steps and agree to it. If they are not happy with the single course of action or say that it is not acceptable to them, the situation may need to be escalated to leadership.

- **Close the interaction and thank the customer.** Once the solution has been agreed upon, make sure you thank the customer for their feedback and the opportunity to address the issue.

- **Document the issue and analyze it for improvement opportunities.** While this is not technically part of the customer interaction, it is a good idea to document and review the issue to determine what caused the customer to experience poor service. Factors like who was involved, what processes and systems were involved, what the poor service cost the department, what solutions were provided to the customer, and what the actual solution cost the department, are important to know. This information can then be used to improve the service and prevent the situation from happening again.

Having to provide service to a customer who is unhappy or angry is not a comfortable experience. It is unpleasant to have to deal with such highly charged emotions, especially if the situation was not your fault and you are now left fixing the problem. Keeping calm, listening to the customer, focusing on facts, developing a complete understanding of the situation, and finding and presenting options will help you to successfully navigate through these situations. As always, I welcome your questions and feedback. You can email me at clayton.taylor@asu.edu.

**About the author:**

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