

A close-up photograph of a person's mouth, showing their teeth and lips. A black headset microphone is positioned over the teeth, with a black cord extending from it. The background is a light blue gradient.

Phrases Customer Service Professionals Should Avoid

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Phrases Customer Service Professionals Should Avoid

Even the most experienced customer service representatives and those with the most positive attitudes can have problems with irate customers. Sometimes this is because the customer is unreasonable, but sometimes the customer service representative uses words or phrases out of habit that irritate customers. Avoiding these words and phrases can significantly reduce the amount of problems you will have with customers. Avoiding these words and phrases may require that you check your attitude. If you think that most customers are unreasonable or stupid or otherwise bothersome, it will be more difficult for you to avoid saying things that may offend them. Remember that irritated customers become former customers. If enough customers become former customers, your employer will have less need for your services.

“Huh?”

Many customers find this word quite irritating. They will think that you were not listening, or that you are trying to tell them to speak more clearly, or that you do not understand what they said. In any case, they will perceive you as an obstacle to achieving their goal, rather than someone who can help. Think about how frustrated you feel when you are trying to explain something to someone who asks, “Huh?” You feel frustrated because you have to start all over. The customer feels the same frustration when they hear “huh?” from you. If you think that a transaction is going along just fine and the customer suddenly demands to speak to your supervisor, ask yourself if you said “huh?” during the transaction.

“They...”

If you refer to your employer as “they,” you immediately give the customer the impression that you will not be employed by your employer for very long. You give the impression that you are helpless and powerless to help the customer resolve their issue. You give the impression that you do not understand the reasons behind decisions made by your employer and that you do not want to take responsibility for any problems these decisions may cause. A customer who hears “they” knows immediately that the customer service representative is incapable of completely understanding their issue, much less able to solve the problem. To think of yourself as one of the “we” instead of thinking of your employer as “they,” think about what kind of business your employer is engaged in and why people buy products or services from “you.” This will help you keep in mind the long term goals of the business and will help you see solutions to problems.

“I can’t help it.” / “It’s not my fault.”

You may be tempted to say something like this if a customer complains about a previous transaction. You may need to simply listen to understand the problem. You may not need to do anything. The problem may have already been resolved, and the customer simply wants to vent some frustration or know that there is a listening ear at your organization. The customer is not interested in which associate made a mistake or caused a problem for them. The customer wants the problem to be solved. You do not have to badmouth a coworker to reduce the customer’s anger. You can say something like, “I’m sorry you had so much trouble. Here is what I can do...”

“What’s the difference?”

This question lets the customer know that you are not listening. It is a rhetorical question, which means that you do not expect the customer to give you an explanation of the difference between one thing and another thing. When you ask, “What’s the difference?” you are not really asking a question. What you are doing is trying to make the customer see that they are being silly or picky or worrying over nothing. Asking this question will almost always escalate a confrontation and make a slightly irritated customer an angry customer. If you really do not understand the customer’s problem, ask appropriate and relevant questions that will help you to understand. Do not ask rhetorical questions. Ask yourself what you would say if you ask a customer what the difference is and they reply, “Seventy-nine cents.” If you really believe that the customer is complaining about something petty or silly, just listen. Try not to interrupt. You may not have to do anything else. The customer may simply need to vent their frustration with something loosely related to your product or service.

“I don’t know.”

While some customers may admire you for your honesty, most customers will ask to speak to someone who does know. Almost all customers will become irritated or frustrated when they hear, “I don’t know.” You can be honest with customers without giving the impression that they are wasting their time speaking with you. You can say something like, “That’s a good question. Let me find out for you.” Supervisors can help new customer service representatives avoid having to say this phrase by providing adequate training that will cover anything a customer might ask about. Experienced customer service representatives can help their coworkers avoid having to say “I don’t know” simply by sharing their experiences with each other.

“You need to...” / “You didn’t...” / “If you had...”

It may be a good idea to help a regular customer avoid repeating the same error, but you must do so tactfully and courteously. You can even use such a situation to increase customer satisfaction. A good way to handle this might be to say, “I can understand why you got frustrated. Things will go more smoothly next time if you_____.”

You may feel better if you make the customer realize that they were the one who caused a problem, not you or your coworkers, but you will end up losing the customer. The customer may already know that they were the one who caused the problem, but does not want to admit it. This may be one situation in which the less said the better. The customer may not say anything to you, but they will most likely be grateful if you take care of the problem quickly and quietly. Grateful customers are loyal customers.

“That’s not my department.”

Customers are not interested in how your store or your company is organized. If a customer hears this phrase they will get frustrated and probably think that you are intentionally trying to put an obstacle in their way, or they will think that you are trying to avoid having to deal with their problem. If the customer asks where they can find something in a store, tell them if you know. If you do not know, tell the customer, “One moment and I’ll find out.” Then find someone who can help the customer. If helping the customer means unlocking a cabinet or opening someone else’s register, politely let the customer know that it may take a few minutes. If the customer is on the telephone and you need to transfer them, it might help to say something like, “Thanks for being so patient. I need to transfer you to someone who can help you with that.”

“Calm down!”

Using this phrase will usually have the opposite effect of what you intend. The irate customer may be talking loudly because they feel they have not been heard in previous attempts to deal with a problem, or that you are not listening. Telling them to calm down could reinforce the belief that no one is listening and the only way to resolve a problem is to shout to be heard. It is often best to let the customer get whatever it is off their chest, listening closely to the content of the complaint. You can then ask questions to clarify if necessary, or tell the customer what you intend to do to help. You may be thinking of the comfort of other customers when you tell someone to calm down, but telling an irate customer to calm down will often cause them to get even louder. The most effective way to actually get someone to calm down is to demonstrate that you are listening. Nodding your head and saying “I see” or “Mm hmm” will often lower the volume after just a few seconds. If you really think that an enraged customer poses a danger to yourself or other customers follow security protocols. Telling such a person to calm down will most likely enrage them even more.

“What’s the problem?”

Many customers will take this question as an accusation. Using this phrase could make you sound like a cop who was sent to deal with an incident. It will put the customer on the defensive and leave them with a bad impression of your organization. You will give the impression that the customer created the problem and that they are imposing on you and your time for having to deal with the problem. It is better to say, “How can I help?”

“That’s not our policy.”

You might as well tell a customer that you do not want their business. That may be the case if a particular customer continually makes unreasonable demands, but such a decision is drastic. Customers are not interested in your policy. What they hear when you say “That’s not our policy” is “I can’t do that,” or “Your problem is too complicated and time consuming for me to deal with right now.” Some customers may even feel that you are implying that they are trying to get something for nothing. The best alternatives to this phrase depend on the situation. Some customers may need clarification of a policy. Some customers may have slipped through the cracks and their situation is not quite covered by a policy. You or your manager may have to make a quick cost-benefit analysis of adhering to a policy versus keeping a customer. Some customers will try to take advantage of unclear language in documents, so you may be better off with such a person as a former customer. However, sometimes the rules need to be bent for good customers. One way to deal with a problem is to say, “Our policy is _____, but we want to keep you as a customer. Please let me see what I can do.”

“Hold on.” / “Hang on.” / “Just a minute.”

It is sometimes necessary to ask customers to wait. What can make a difference between a satisfied customer and a dissatisfied customer can depend on how you ask them to wait. Saying “Just a sec” sounds impatient and unprofessional. It is better to say something like, “Could you wait just a moment? I need to take care of something urgent and then I’ll be right with you,” or simply, “I’ll be right with you.”

“What do you mean?” / “What are you talking about?”

You will sometimes need to ask a customer to clarify something they said, just be careful about how you ask them to do so. “What do you mean?” sounds defensive and is likely to irritate the customer because they will think you are not listening or are trying to avoid their problem. “What are you talking about?” sounds accusatory. It implies that you think the customer is stupid or that they are unjustly trying to accuse you of something. At best, these phrases sound impatient. What the customer will hear is, “Just get to the point so that I can take care of your silly problem and get to the next customer.”

“I can’t do that.”

Customers who hear this phrase will either think that you are intentionally putting up an obstacle for them or will think that you are accusing them of asking you to do something illegal or unethical. If they do not think these things, they will perceive you as incompetent. You should avoid saying “I can’t” whenever possible. What you can say instead is, “Here is what I can do...” If you cannot come up with an alternative, ask your supervisor for help.

“Like I said...”

If a customer does not seem to have heard an answer you gave to a question or anything else you said earlier in a conversation, do not get impatient. Assume that the customer did not hear what you said and say it again. If you say, “Like I said...” the customer will hear “Come on! Pay attention!” This will escalate the confrontation or at least cause you and the customer to take longer to resolve the problem. The customer will probably view you as impatient and an obstruction. When necessary, repeat what you need to repeat without prefacing it with “Like I said...” or “Again...”

“You’re wrong.”

You may be right, but you will always be wrong if you say this to a customer. Remember that your store or your company makes money from repeat business and referrals. Not only will you lose one customer if you tell that customer that they are wrong, you will generate word of mouth advertising for your competitors. This is the best way to create a truly and memorably unpleasant experience for a customer, one that they will tell to everyone they know. It is better to say something such as, “I think there may have been a misunderstanding.”

“I’m busy now.”

To avoid telling customers that you are too busy to help them, remember how your employer is able to write a paycheck for you. It may seem urgent to get your work area tidied up or to get paperwork in order, but your highest priority should be to complete transactions. This gets money in the door. Even if the customer wants to ask a question instead of making a purchase at the time, they will remember that someone helped them when they needed an answer and will be more likely to make a purchase in the future.

“There’s nothing I can do.”

Customers sometimes present baffling problems, but there is almost always something you can do about them. You may need to tell the customer that their problem is unusual and that it may take some time to take care of it. You may need to tell the customer that you will need to get the store manager to help and ask them to be patient. You can always refund the customer’s money. If you tell the customer that there is nothing that you can do, you are telling the customer that they made a bad decision by purchasing from your organization.

“You’ll have to go to our website.”

The information that the customer needs may be on your website, but you can phrase this much more positively. If possible, bring up the website for the customer and talk them through the steps they need to take, or retrieve the information they need. You can say, “I want to make sure you have the most accurate information possible. That information is on our website. May I give you the address?” If you are on the phone with the customer when you say this, offer to stay on the phone after the customer brings up the website to help them navigate through it.

“I just started here.”

Customers are not interested in your employment history. If you think that telling a customer that you are new at the job will make them more patient or help you gain sympathy from them, you will learn quickly that you are incorrect. What is more likely to happen is that the customer will perceive this phrase as an excuse to not have to deal with them. They will see you as an obstacle and take their business elsewhere. If you are new and a customer has a question or presents an issue that is not familiar to you, simply say, “One moment, I need to check with someone to make sure I give you the correct information.” This gives the impression that you are listening and that you are making a sincere effort to help the customer.

“I was just kidding.”

Of course, you should tell a customer that you were just kidding if that is true and it will defuse a situation, but you should not ever have to say that you were just kidding. If you remember that you should not say that you were just kidding, it will help you avoid saying things that make it necessary to tell a customer that you were just kidding. Humor can often make a tense or difficult situation easier to manage, but you must be selective and judicious about how you use it. Customers often take offense at unexpected things. What you consider friendly kidding, teasing, joshing or ribbing may be taken by a customer as a caustic or offensive statement. You may not know the customer as well as you think you do.

Even if you are helping a customer that you know well, avoid saying anything that may cause you to have to tell the customer that you were just kidding. This includes customers who prefer to have you help them instead of other associates. It is important to remember that your relationship with such a person is a professional one. Even if you are a customer's favorite associate and they share details of their personal life, they may not like it if you make jokes about themselves or their family members. It also includes your mother, your sister or other relatives. If you catch them on a bad day, the kidding may rub them the wrong way and you could end up with an animated family discussion in your work place.

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