

How to Deal with Irate Customers



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"How to Deal with Irate Customers"

Written by JJ Lauderbaugh, CMC

It's Friday morning at the office and you hear the phone ringing incessantly. All support people have evaporated into thin air.

You answer it to find a woman ranting and raving about a mistake that occurred the day before with one of your people: You find it embarrassing and try to calm her, but she won't listen. Finally, you manage to get the story and you realize that your company is on the verge of losing this woman's business if something isn't done quickly.

The fact that she is complaining says a lot! People don't complain unless they want you to hear, "I'm not happy with the way you're doing business and here's what's wrong. If you'll make these changes, I'll remain a customer!" If you listen and work to give her what she wants, she might refrain from taking her business elsewhere.

Most people don't complain, they just go somewhere else and we never know why they left. In fact, studies show that only four percent of our unhappy customers complain, the other 96 percent vote with their feet and go to the competition. What do you do when you have a complaint, especially if the comparable business is right down the street?

Last September, I was the opening keynote speaker at the Pacific Water Quality Association Conference in Anaheim, California. To customize my presentation, I spoke to a number of members about their current challenges and complaints. One member said, "When we don't get complaints, we assume we don't have any problems. Our attitude is, let the sleeping dog lie." He said he knew this was a time bomb waiting to go off, but he also felt helpless to do anything about it in an understaffed, small operation.

The day-to-day business of handling the phones, demonstrating equipment, functioning as a route salesperson, maintenance person, conducting credit checks, keeping computer input updated, and tracking other company functions leaves little time for managers in small operations to do much more than put out the necessary fires.

Do you want to be in business in five years? If your answer is yes, then a mind set, culture and attitude change may be due in your management style, especially in handling irate customers.

Teach yourself and your people to partner with your customers through the functions of the day. Whether business-to-business or business-to-consumer, treat each person as though he or she is the most important person of your day, every day! When a complaint is heard, take the time to discover why the customer is upset so changes can be made to save that customer and others, who may not be complaining. Look for consistencies and multiple complaints in specific areas.

Your customers are cost driven, looking for the cheapest products, and if you don't have an edge on price or product, you must have an edge on customer service. The service culture you create now to care for

your customers can be the savior of your business. Become a customer service fanatic in every aspect of the business. Create customer demand for your products because of your extraordinary service.

Everyone in your organization needs to be an important part of that service culture. This is when each one of your people accepts full responsibility for the customer's experience, regardless of the circumstances. Customers know they're in good hands and will be given the benefit of the doubt. They also buy again from people they like, based on their emotions about your service.

Use your manpower more efficiently to care for your customers. Make every contact count, every day! Use a self-evaluating 1 to 10 scale. Say to yourself, on that last phone call or sales/service call, I was a 5, with 10 being the best. Ask yourself, how could I have been an 8 or higher? You may think, I could have listened better and not interrupted when he wanted to vent. I should have used some defusing words to calm him, such as "I can appreciate how inconvenienced you were." I should not have argued or been defensive, and I should have thanked him for letting us know we have a situation to correct. On the next call or interface, you decide you'll be an 8, regardless of the circumstances. This self-correcting game you play with yourself has huge benefits and rewards for everyone in your company.

Differentiate yourself from your competition with your service. Advertise it as exceptional, and make sure you deliver. Never over promise and under deliver. Do the reverse!

Start by cleaning house with your present staff. Ask yourself, are they good communicators with above average people skills? Do your customers' faces light up with a smile when they see or hear from them? Are they goal oriented? Do they have a professional appearance? Do they clean up after installation and maintenance work without having to be asked? Do they consistently show they care about their customers as people? Do they have positive attitudes, and are they willing to change, take risks and most importantly, grow?

If your people don't present the professional, friendly, and caring image you need, have the courage to help them find a job in which they would be better suited. It may not be with your company, and you'll need to hire replacements. Remember to hire your new recruits on people skills and attitude; you can usually teach them the business.

During the interview process, you talk 20 percent of the time and let them answer your questions and speak 80 percent of the time. One of the reasons people are in the wrong jobs is because interviewers reversed the percentages, and sold the applicant on taking the job.

Once you have the right people, teach them to come from the heart. Do that by demonstrating it yourself, with them. As management, treat them the way you want them to treat your customers. There is a direct correlation back to the way management treats staff. If a person reports to you, you are their greatest motivation!

Some good mottos used by companies are, "Give the customer whoever and whatever they need to make the situation right," and "Never argue with or make the customer wrong!" No, you aren't to be a doormat either. There are phrases to avoid and others to use that will accomplish this. Everyone needs these tools so they are prepared

in all circumstances. Supplying the words and phrases helps tremendously, but role playing will "lock in" the phrases so they use them. Give your people a no-risk environment to make their mistakes and find their successes. And tell them that they don't have to be good at it to get this valuable experience.

When everyone in your company is a customer service fanatic, they readily take responsibility for the customer's experience. They look for new ways to interface with the customer. They enjoy hands-on suggesting of additional items and products, and they know they are actually offering the customer an additional service to save them time, stress and money. They enjoy the process and recognize that they are preselling for future business.

And remember, a manager who wears many hats often develops bad habits of getting over-stressed and serious with life. You and your employees need to take enough "down" times to recharge. Then you can continue to be service fanatics and ready for that rare irate customer.

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