



How to Deal With Difficult Customers and Situations and Better Yet, How to Prevent Them

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Here's how to deal
with **difficult customers** and situations and -- better yet, how to

PREVENT THEM

Most equipment dealers know that difficult customers and situations “come with the territory.” When dealing with expensive transactions or equipment breakdowns, even the most mild-mannered customer may get upset. What is important is learning how to deal with these encounters and mitigating any negativity that may result.

Whether you are dealing face-to-face or on the phone, these situations can be more than mere challenges. If you can't handle them professionally, resolve the problems, and turn them into successful situations, your unhappy customers will switch over to your competitor. It's that simple. Inevitably, these customers will tell others they were not satisfied with your service. The result will be an assault on your reputation – something no distributor can afford.

It's important to handle difficult customers and situations with the utmost professionalism. That requires shifting into the right mind-set and communicating with them in a confident, competent, and non-combative manner. As a start to the process, follow these guidelines to help you through a tough encounter:

1. Maintain your cool. There may be angry words, personal affronts, and highly charged emotions. This is the kind of situation where it is easy to lose your cool and become defensive – especially if the customer is being unreasonable. Stay cool.

Let's assume you are a service manager and you receive a call from a disgruntled customer's mechanic who is trying to deal with an equipment problem. The mechanic is very challenging, but you remind yourself that he or she is not as technically proficient as you are. Therefore, you can be more sympathetic to his or her problem. Assume the “be cool” attitude. Be patient, (even if your service department is swamped!), stay calm and reassure them that you will help them solve the problem.

Do not sound impatient or say anything to make it worse. Now is not the time to remind them that they shouldn't have touched anything and that you had given them the proper maintenance procedure when you delivered the machine. Instead, be cool and start with a positive approach. Begin by asking a few questions and talking the customer through the problem, step by step. Reassure the customer along the way. If you can't talk it through, get help to them as quickly as possible.



2. Admit you are wrong. Take responsibility immediately if you or anyone in your company made the mistake. Even if there is some doubt, settle the problem some way. This is hard to do, since ultimately there is a financial responsibility. Nevertheless, own up to the situation. Hopefully, the financial burden will be light. At the very least, you will have saved a customer, and that will mean business in the future. Everyone can make a mistake – don't make another one by turning off your customer.

3. Know what the customer wants.

Generally, an angry person just wants to vent his or her anger. Usually that means taking the anger out on someone else – in this case, you. You will get the brunt of it, even if you are not to blame. Often, a customer will take it out on you even when the field tech did not respond fast enough or the new equipment purchase was not delivered when promised. Let them vent, be empathetic, then give them the reassurance that:

- ▶ You are concerned with their problem.
- ▶ You are capable of handling the situation.
- ▶ You understand their problem is urgent.
- ▶ They can expect a fast response.
- ▶ They are important to you.

4. Do not judge or correct. Never judge or correct a customer. If they are angry with you, refrain from making any statements that are judgmental or you may cause the customer to go on the defensive. Now is not the time to say, “Why didn't you make sure you maintained the excavator properly?” or “Why didn't you change the oil?”

Apologize, empathize, and help them in every way possible. If you can solve the problem and send them out the door as a happy customer, then you have handled the situation well. In fact, studies show that deftly handling tough situations and solving problems with professionalism actually yields the opportunity to build stronger business relationships.

5. Apply “verbal cushions.” When a customer is angry, diffuse the situation by applying a communication technique taught by customer service trainers. These words and phrases “cushion” a customer's complaint and will help you to service them more effectively. The verbal cushions below communicate a sense of concern, promote cooperation, and display empathy.

Memorize them so that you can apply them in challenging situations.

- ▶ “I apologize that this occurred, John.”
- ▶ “I can understand why you are upset.”
- ▶ “I'm very sorry this has happened to you.”
- ▶ “I apologize if there's been a misunderstanding.”
- ▶ “I can understand why you would be unhappy.”
- ▶ “I understand your position.”
- ▶ “Thank you for bringing this to my attention.”
- ▶ “I agree with you completely. This is crucial to the job you're doing.”
- ▶ “I recognize the urgency involved. Let me take care of this immediately.”

6. Calm out-of-control customers.

When dealing with customers who use foul language and just won't back down, steel yourself against the onslaught and stay calm. This is never easy, but stay cool and make statements such as:

- ▶ “Sir, I haven't said or done anything to disrespect you in any way. May I ask the same of you and will you let me help you?”
- ▶ “Let's work this out in a professional manner.”

7. Be proactive in problem prevention.

Progressive dealers know that the best way to offset a situation with difficult customers is to be proactive in avoiding mistakes. Proactive complaint prevention is a strong part of their culture. Make sure your dealership has the appropriate, timely systems and procedures in place to avoid problems that can cause customers to become difficult.

Dealing with difficult customers and preventing difficult situations involves a great deal more than this. For now, take these tips:

Welcome complaints. How else will you know what needs to be fixed?

Know where every part customers will need is located, and keep your warehouse in impeccable order.

Have a team standing by with people who are trained to locate a part when you can't find it in 30 minutes.

Make sure every department and every employee serve each other exceptionally well. If they don't, how can you provide the highest quality service to customers and develop a reputation for service excellence?

Check and double-check every sales, maintenance, and billing entry on every order, every day.

Keep your customers and salespeople informed when a problem occurs.

Ask for and obtain accountability from every employee to display a sense of urgency to serve.

Don't suggest the warranty unless you are sure it applies.

Take ownership of any problem you receive. Don't pass it on until you are sure the right person is handling it.

Have product support managers get out and talk to customers face to face. Ask if they are happy. Visit smaller customers too. Don't neglect customers who are not located near your dealership. They are important too.

If you send a tech out and they will be more than 10 minutes late, make sure they call the customer to let them know.

If a customer is waiting for important information and you are held up, call to let them know it's on the front burner, and you will call them the moment you have the answer.

Never make a promise you can't keep.

Ask complete questions, and paraphrase to reconfirm what customers want.

Obtain complete contact information, machine locations, model, year, hours, etc.

Communicate full, accurate information to internal and external customers. This is especially important when it involves overtime. Let them know up front.

Don't assume your staff knows how to handle difficult customers and situations. Provide training.

Make sure parts and service managers receive training on leadership and employee motivation.

Hold weekly meetings on Monday mornings with your service manager, parts manager, and branch manager to talk about the week before and discuss problems.

Salespeople must understand how the service department functions. They should go back and observe and understand why they can get backed up for three days. They should also “sell” your product support departments.

A Final Word

Develop an obsession to consistently deliver the highest level of service to every customer, every day.

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