

Working Through Customer Complaints

Written by Steve Marr

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Most of us will encounter an unhappy customer who lodges a complaint. A businessperson can look at these complaints as an opportunity to respond to a shortcoming in service which is fixable or as an annoyance to be ignored as much as possible. If we learn to adapt a simple system to work towards a constructive solution, the outcome will be better for everyone. Here is a strategy I have used:

It is important to allow the person to vent their displeasure. Let them talk as long as they choose and as long as they are not disrespectful or use abusive language. Only after listening thoroughly to a customer's position and taking notes, ask the customer if they have anything else to add to the complaint. Do not interrupt until the customer has finished speaking.

2. Ask qualifying questions.

Then, in a calm and controlled voice ask qualifying questions, if necessary. Your goal here is to clarify and confirm your understanding of the customer's complaint. Important information may be lost in the communication process when we hear what we want to hear or misinterpret the customer's perspective.

3. Repeat the customer's complaint.

When you have finished asking qualifying questions, repeat a clear summary of the customer's complaint as the customer shared it. Be calm and respectful as you do.

4. Ask the customer for suggestions to address the issue

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Ask this after insuring you understand the customer's issues. Ranting and raving accomplishes little. However, giving the customer a chance to suggest actions that would make a situation right is the beginning of resolution.

5. Where possible, agree to reasonable solutions.

Your goal is to satisfy the customer and give them a reason to continue to do business with you. Most customers calm down significantly when they receive exactly what they ask for.

6. Apologize when necessary.

In any situation where you believe you or the business has fallen short, make sure that you give a full and complete apology, not excuses. King Solomon wrote, "Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy." (Proverbs 28:13, NIV)

Keep in mind when a customer raises an issue, we need to treat these as opportunities to strengthen our relationship with them. We all have experienced times when we believe a business has fallen short. We have also seen what happens when we share a reasonable complaint and the other party moves into a defensive mode making excuses and blaming everything on "customer error."

Embrace customer complaints as an opportunity to solidify your business relationship and to find ways to improve your service. Not only will you keep your customers, you will grow your customer base as well.