

# Soothing Dissatisfied Customers

“Uh, oh. She’s upset,” Jane thinks as she watches a customer walk angrily toward the counter. “Stay calm,” she tells herself. “Let her talk.”

Laying a dress on the counter the woman says, “I bought this dress for a wedding and, as I was getting dressed, I saw it was torn! Your store was closed, and I didn’t have another dress to wear. I want my money back. I’m never buying anything from this store again!”

Using her kindest voice, Jane responds, “I’m really sorry that happened to you. I understand why you’re so upset. If it had happened to me . . .”

The woman cuts Jane off in mid-sentence: “What really has me upset,” she says, “is that your store would sell a dress in this condition!”

Jane feels herself getting defensive, “Stay cool,” she reminds herself. “She’s upset with the dress, not with you.” When she tells her customer, “We will find a way to make this up to you. I can think of several things we can do,” the customer’s face softens. Jane offers, “If you still want this

dress, we can find a replacement for you. Or you can exchange the dress for something else in the store. Or we can refund your money. In addition, I would like to give you a \$25 gift certificate toward a future purchase.”

The woman thinks for a moment and then replies, “Well, we do need a new gas grill. I could apply the refund and the gift certificate toward one. I’ll go down to the

Outdoors Department to see how much the grills cost.”

“Let me call for you,” Jane says, “I’ll explain the situation to the sales clerk.” “Thank you,” says the woman, “You’ve restored my faith in the store.”



## What’s Inside

### *Here, you will learn to*

- ◆ view complaints as opportunities
- ◆ deal with angry customers
- ◆ stop complaints in advance
- ◆ say “no” to customers
- ◆ cope with on-the-job stress

Workshop  
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## Viewing Complaints as Opportunities

Listening to customer complaints is part of every employee's job. Have you heard complaints like these before? Perhaps you've even made similar ones:

- ◆ "What do you mean you can't finish the painting until Friday? We have guests coming on Wednesday!"
- ◆ "I can't believe you won't take my check. I've been shopping here for years!"
- ◆ "I ordered those flowers in plenty of time for my spouse's birthday. I felt terrible when she didn't get them?"
- ◆ "Your service is awful! I want to talk to a manager!"

Customers usually complain because their expectations haven't been met. But there are countless other reasons why customers complain, such as pressure from a boss or family member. Sometimes, they are just having a bad day. Whether you believe a complaint has merit or not, bear in mind that the customer thinks the complaint is legitimate. And that's what is important. Even if the customer is downright rude, you must be patient, professional, and willing to help.

Why should you bother being helpful to someone who is rude? Let's consider a few reasons: First, dissatisfied customers, even the most difficult ones, provide valuable information about your company, your products, or your services. Each complaint is a signal that something needs to be fixed. If one customer is dissatisfied, others may be dissatisfied also.



Second, dissatisfied customers tell their friends about their negative experience, and those friends tell others. If you fix a problem promptly, you can transform dissatisfied customers into satisfied customers, and they will be likely to tell their friends about their positive experiences. That's a much better ending!

Third, every complaint provides an opportunity to change a customer's mind and increase loyalty. If you have a problem with a company, don't you feel better when an employee listens to you, supports you, and corrects the problem in a way that exceeds your expectations?

Research shows that 70 percent of customers will continue to do business with a company if their complaints are resolved to their satisfaction. Ninety-five percent will continue to do business with the company if their complaints are resolved satisfactorily on the spot. Isn't this worth the effort to turn dissatisfied customers into satisfied customers?

## When a Customer Is Angry or Upset

Complaints are a part of every business, and every employee must know how to deal with them. Much has been written on this topic, since many employees find handling upset customers to be one of the most stressful aspects of their work. Ron McCann, the author of *The Joy of Service*, writes “Inside every complaint is a request for service.”

When customers are angry or upset, try to calm them, then solve their problem. Here are a few steps that you can follow to win over unhappy customers.

- ◆ **Let the customer vent.** Don’t interrupt. Let the customer have his or her say. Venting provides emotional relief. It’s a little like letting air out of an over-filled balloon.
- ◆ **Stay calm.** Angry customers are not upset with you; they are upset with the problem. Analyze the problem so you can offer a solution. Don’t get defensive or allow yourself to be drawn into an argument. Even if you win an argument with a customer, you lose when the customer takes his business elsewhere.



- ◆ **Listen actively.** When a customer complains, listen carefully to the facts and try to understand the person’s feelings. Nod, smile or frown as appropriate, and lean toward the customer to show that you’re listening. If a problem is complex, take

notes—to remind yourself of the customer’s complaint. The action of writing shows the customer you’re serious.

- ◆ **Ask open-ended questions.** These cannot be answered “yes” or “no.”

You need to clearly understand the

customer’s version of the problem. Sometimes it helps to restate the problem, using different words from the customer’s.

- ◆ **Show you understand.** Empathizing shows you’re concerned about the customer; it doesn’t mean you agree with the complaint. With words and body language, show that you respect the customer’s point of view. See the box below for empathetic phrases that calm irate customers. Some experts recommend memorizing phrases like these so they come to mind quickly.

### Try These Empathizing Phrases

- ◆ “I understand how frustrating this must be.”
- ◆ “I can see why you’re so angry.”
- ◆ “I’m sorry we’ve let you down.”
- ◆ “Let’s see what we can do to fix this problem.”

◆ **Apologize.** If a mistake has caused the problem, apologize, even if the mistake wasn't your fault. Don't blame someone else or make excuses; customers aren't interested. They just want to have their problem solved.



◆ **Offer options.** Suggest several possible solutions to a problem and ask the customer if one of them is acceptable. If the answer is no, ask for other suggestions. Look for the most practical response. You don't have to give the store away, or beg for forgiveness and mercy.”

◆ **Find a solution that satisfies the customer.** Sometimes, you can win customers back simply by listening, empathizing, and sincerely apologizing. Other times, they want something more. When more is needed, ask how they want the problem corrected. If the request is reasonable—in most cases it will be—and is something you are authorized to grant, act immediately! If you're not authorized to grant the request, say, “I'm not authorized to do that, but here's what I can do.”

◆ **If you can't fix the problem.** When you can't reach agreement with a customer, you have two choices: Ask your supervisor for help, or apologize again and give the customer a full refund, if authorized. Some customers complain simply for the sake of complaining, and nothing you do will satisfy them.

◆ **When appropriate, follow up.** A few days after solving a problem, call the customer to check in.

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People who fight fire with  
fire usually end up with ashes.

— **ABIGAIL VAN BUREN**  
**(DEAR ABBY)**

*Newspaper Columnist*

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## ACTIVITY 6.1

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

### Solving the Angry Customer's Problem

Several angry customers are described below. Suggest ways you can help them. Your goal is to turn them into repeat buyers.

1. A grandmother returns a toy she gave her granddaughter on her last visit. It was broken when the child took it out of the box. The child was very upset because her brother's present from his grandmother worked perfectly. Now, the grandmother is upset.
2. A middle-aged executive stops for a hair trim before his 2 p.m. appointment with an important client. As you wash his hair, you accidentally spill shampoo on his white shirt. He looks at you in disbelief.
3. You call a customer to let her know that the dress she's had altered for a special occasion is ready to be picked up. When she comes in, you ask her for her receipt, but she's forgotten it. You explain that you aren't allowed to give her the dress without a receipt. She becomes angrier and angrier.
4. Two days ago, a customer called your company to complain that the bill he'd received in the mail was not correct. The receptionist put the call through to the Billing Department. The customer was annoyed to hear a voice mail message, but he repeated his complaint anyway. Now it's two days later, and the customer is calling back, very angry that no one has returned his call. You're the billing clerk he speaks with.

## “I Want to Talk to a Manager!”

If you have a problem with a product or service and a company does not seem able (or willing) to help you, won't you be upset? Will you ask to talk to a manager?

Experts in customer service recommend two options when customers demand to talk to a manager: (1) Do what the customer asks, immediately. Apologize for the problem, ask the customer for his or her name, and get the manager. (2) Ask for permission to try to solve the problem. Explain that you'll be happy to get the manager if your solution isn't satisfactory. Then try to find an adequate solution.

Refrain from saying “No” when someone demands to speak with a manager unless that's your company policy.



## Stop Complaints Before They Develop

Knowing how to soothe upset customers is important, but a better plan is to prevent complaints. Here are two suggestions:

- ◆ *Always be truthful.* Don't try to cover up a mistake or problem. Always be honest about what a customer should expect. “Underpromise and overdeliver” is a key concept you should apply to any customer service situation. Don't exaggerate the benefits of your solution.
- ◆ *Beat them to the punch.* If you know that a customer is going to be disappointed, explain the situation. For example, if an item a customer ordered is unavailable, tell the person and suggest an option. If a job is going to cost more than estimated, call and explain the problem, then get approval before continuing. If the price for a service has increased, contact customers who routinely purchase that service and explain why the price increase is necessary. By keeping your customers informed, you'll prevent complaints.

If you quickly solve a problem that's ruining a customer's day, that customer will return 95 percent of the time to do business with you.

— JOHN TSCHOHL

*President, Service Quality Institute*

## Service Recovery

The concept of service recovery involves apologizing, taking responsibility, fixing the problem, and then offering the customer something “extra” to lessen the hurt. When you’re trying to regain a customer’s loyalty, giving more than is expected will please your customer. Jane, who must resolve the torn dress problem in the opening story, practiced service recovery by offering a \$25 gift certificate. When you consider the effect loyal customers have on a company’s income over several years, the \$25 gift certificate is a good investment. A word of caution: Get permission from your supervisor before giving away certificates.

Many companies authorize their employees to provide discounts on future purchases, to cut the price on the current purchase, or to offer promotional items. Others empower their employees to do whatever is reasonable to satisfy a customer.

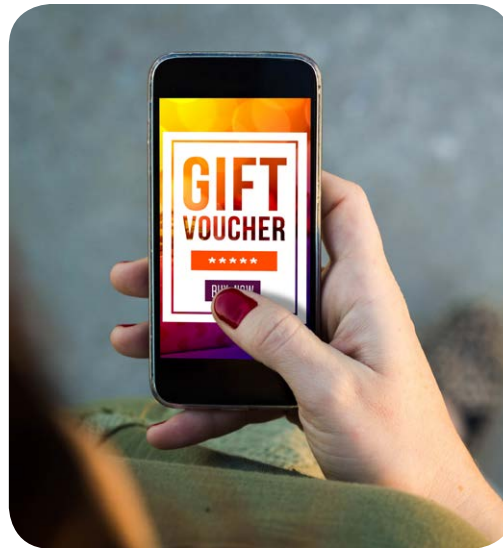
## Saying No

When you have to refuse a customer’s request, acknowledge that you understand the problem, then apologize and explain why you have to say no. Turn

the situation into a positive by saying, “But here’s what we can do for you.”

Suppose a customer calls to schedule repair work for her broken clothes washer and states that it’s covered by a maintenance agreement. When you look up the customer’s account, the record

shows the maintenance agreement expired several months ago. If you reply, “Your washer is no longer covered by a service agreement. You’ll have to pay



## Service Recovery at the Ritz-Carlton

At Ritz-Carlton luxury hotels, the care and comfort of hotel guests is everyone’s number-one priority. If a guest has a problem or a special need, employees break away from their regular duties to resolve the issue. If an employee receives a complaint, he or she becomes the owner of the complaint and is authorized to resolve it to the guest’s satisfaction. As related by John Tschohl, president of the Service Quality Institute, employees at a Ritz-Carlton hotel can spend up to \$2,000 to resolve a problem and prevent it from happening again.

The Ritz-Carlton provides legendary service. Does this commitment have an effect on customer satisfaction? You bet it does. As noted by Tschohl, a JD Power survey of hotels gave the Ritz-Carlton a whopping 94 percent customer satisfaction rating. The next highest rating was just 57 percent.

for the repair,” the customer may argue. A better response is, “I’m sorry. We won’t be able to do the repair work for free, since your maintenance agreement expired several months ago. But, if you’d like to renew your agreement now, I can arrange for quick service. Shall we do that?” When possible, soften a “No” with service recovery.

Suppose a customer orders an entertainment center and wants it delivered next week, but your

truck won’t be delivering to the customer’s area for two weeks. To soften the blow, try saying, “I’m sorry. The next time our truck will be in your area is Wednesday, August 16. I’m afraid that schedule is firm, and I can’t change it. But I can request that yours is the first delivery of the day. Would you like me to do that?” By explaining the situation and offering something positive, you offset the hurt.

## ACTIVITY 6.2

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

### What Would You Say?

For each of the following scenes, would you agree with the customer’s request? If not, what solution would you offer? Discuss your answers with your classmates or coworkers. There are no right or wrong answers.

1. An insurance agent ships an important document to a customer by Second-Day Air. The customer doesn’t receive it on the scheduled day. The agent calls the shipping company and says that he was greatly inconvenienced by the delay, will never use the company again, and wants a full refund. If you were the customer service representative who took the call, how would you respond?
2. A young man buys an expensive pair of skis, as well as boots and poles. The next day he goes skiing, hits a tree, and breaks his ski and his leg. He calls the sporting goods store where he bought the skis and demands his money back. He states that the skis didn’t perform well, causing his accident. If you took the call, how would you respond?
3. A customer orders a book online. When it is delivered, he begins to read it and doesn’t like it. He sends an email to the company explaining that he wants his money back because the book doesn’t meet his quality standards. He adds that he’ll be happy to return the book if the company pays for shipping, which is against your company’s policy. How would you respond?



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## Coping with Your Own Stress

Dealing with difficult customers is stressful—there’s no doubt about it. To keep a positive outlook, you need to develop effective ways to prevent stress and to release the stress that does build up.

### Preventing Stress

One way to prevent stress buildup has already been discussed: Remind yourself frequently that complaining customers are not upset with you. They are upset with the problem. Put your energy into solving the problem.

Another effective way to prevent stress is to analyze how your body tenses. Does your neck tighten up? Do you clench your teeth? Do you tap your fingers? If you know your “early warning signals” of stress, you can reorganize your thoughts and refocus on the problem.

## Relieving Stress

If you can’t prevent stress, then you need to find ways to relieve it. Scientific research shows that the following methods are helpful.

- ◆ Take a short break. Focus on positive thoughts to recenter yourself.
- ◆ Go for a brisk walk to revitalize your body.
- ◆ Take a few minutes to write, as objectively as you can, what happened. It will help you put things in perspective.
- ◆ Tell someone else what happened. If possible, vent to another person who also deals with difficult customers and who will understand what you’ve been through.
- ◆ Exercise! Go for a run after work; play tennis with a friend. Regular aerobic exercise—the type that gets your blood pumping—both reduces stress and helps your body cope with stressful situations.
- ◆ Try relaxation exercises, such as meditation.
- ◆ Make use of a support group of people who care about you and want to help.



## ACTIVITY 6.3

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

### Stress Relief

What do you do to relieve stress? Explain your favorite stress-release methods in the spaces below. If you haven't developed effective ways of relieving stress, explain some methods that you'd like to try. Then make a commitment to try them.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Vigorous exercise is the best antidote for nervous and emotional stress that we possess.

— **DR. DUDLEY WHITE**  
*Cardiologist*



## GETTING CONNECTED

For suggestions on how to manage stress caused by customers, log on to:

**<https://myqss.link/Manage-Stress>**

Then take one of the customer service quizzes at:

**<https://myqss.link/CS-Quiz>**

## WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- Customers generally complain because their expectations haven't been met.
- View customer complaints as opportunities to learn how your products or services need to be improved.
- When dissatisfied customers understand that you sincerely want to make things right, they often become more loyal than they were before the problem occurred.
- Customers will continue to do business with a company if an employee listens to their complaint and solves it to their satisfaction.
- When a customer is upset, first use your listening skills and empathy to calm him or her down; then solve the problem.
- Whenever possible, offer the dissatisfied customer a solution that exceeds his or her expectations.
- If you have to turn down a customer's request, explain why and then say what you can do instead.
- Be sure to have outlets for releasing stress.