

HANDLING COMPLAINTS*

Offering excuses or attempting to blame someone else are other unprofessional responses to complaints. The complaining customer is not interested in explanations or blame pitching. He is only interested in having the situation corrected.

Professionals in the business use a set of specific steps in handling complaints.

1. **Allow the customer (member) to vent** emotion if it is present. Recognize it for what it is, and do not take it as a personal attack on you. (The “you” in “you idiot” is not aimed at you personally.)
2. Separate the facts from the feelings to **identify the basis of the complaint**. Listen for facts that will give insight into a solution. Anger may be suppressed; look for sarcasm or highly formal language. What the customer perceives as being true is always true . . . from his standpoint. This should always be the frame of reference, not what is true from your standpoint.
3. Express empathy and a willingness to help. If the customer is expressing anger, acknowledge his right to be angry. If the company is truly at fault, admit it and apologize; but do not take the blame yourself, unless you personally made the mistake. Do not put the blame on somebody else either. **Keep the emphasis on solving the problem**, not exploring the cause of it. Do not say something that you do not really feel -- it will show as insincerity. Most of us can genuinely make statements such as “I’m sorry you were inconvenienced by this . . .” or “I’m sorry that this happened . . .”.
4. **State the problem as you understand it** and get an agreement that you have understood it correctly. Use open-ended questions to fill in information that was not supplied. (If the person is really upset, give him a chance to cool down first.) Stay with the questioning until you have identified the real problem.
5. **Offer one or more solutions**. If none are acceptable to the customer, ask what would satisfy him. Allow the guest to keep his dignity intact (to “save face”). Know what the company policies are on customer complaints and what options you have.
6. **Get agreement on mutually acceptable solution**. If you do not have authority to offer what the guest is seeking, call the manager.
7. **Carry out whatever solution was agreed on and be sure it is done correctly**. Stay with the problem, and do not let yourself get interrupted.
8. Follow up closely and make sure that everything goes as agreed on, and that the customer has no further cause for complaint. **Make every effort to resolve the complaint** while working with the customer.

In general, the professional approach is to establish a positive, courteous, open climate of problem solving -- not a confrontation between customer and employee, but rather, customer and employee versus the problem. Be positive. Use positive language.

For example:

Negative

Your complaint
You have to . . .
I can't . . .
You should have . . .

Positive

Your concern or question
Will you . . . please
We can
Will you . . . please

The professional also inspires confidence in the customer that the problem will be resolved. This is done through positive language and attending behaviors:

Inspires no confidence

Okay. I've got that.

That's a common problem.
That's not my area.

We've had a lot of trouble with that.
I don't know if I can help you with that.

Don't worry about it.

Inspires confidence

Let me read this back to be sure
Be sure I've got it right.

I'll give this my immediate attention.
We will take care of it right away.

I'll replace it with a better one right away.
Thank you for calling. Let me transfer you to Mrs. Smith who can help you with that.
I'll call you back within an hour and tell you how it will be handled.

Most customer complaints can be resolved with an apology and a corrective action by the supervisor. It may mean getting help for another employee who is stuck, correcting a fault with a service, or offering a replacement. If the complaint is by nature one that cannot be right, you can show the customer that you really care about his patronage by picking up all or part of the check or by offering a discount or free service. If the customer is ready to depart or is calling or writing to complain after the experience, you may ask him for another chance and offer a service on the house (depending on the company policy, of course). Whatever the action, apologize and mean it.

Fortunately, frauds, professional cheats, and chronic complainers are few in number. Giving a free plant or service to a professional cheat once in a while is much less costly than losing the future business of a customer with a legitimate complaint.

As mentioned earlier, a employee may see a complaining customer as a threat -- an insult to his ability to do his job, or perhaps even a threat to his personal integrity. Admittedly, there are people in this world who feel inadequate and insecure. They sometimes try to compensate by bullying people who are not in a position to fight back. These types are real challenge, and that is the only way to deal with them . . . as a challenge to professionalism. Lowering oneself to that level by acting defensively is just what this kind of person wants. If one permits oneself to get angry with the person, one has lost control of the situation. The objective is to keep in control by providing every service necessary to satisfy him. Extra attention should be given to be sure he has absolutely nothing to complain about. Sometimes the insecure, complaining customer can be won over to become a steady customer and a loyal supporter once he learns to feel secure and knows he will receive all the attention he craves.

*Taken from Dining Room Management by Carole King

