

Six Simple Steps to Customer Conflict Resolution

Written by admin

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by Michael Blunk Th.D



A Raging Bull

During the 1970s, the British Broadcasting Corporation produced a genuinely clever situation comedy starring John Cleese who portrayed a frustrated inn keeper who could not get along with his wife, his staff, or his customers. If a guest complained about a poorly prepared dinner, Basil Fawlty responded with insults. If his wife brought a grievance to his attention, he responded with an insult. And on those occasions when employees bungled their assigned duties, Mr. Fawlty responded with more insults. As one might imagine, Basil Fawlty's resort never achieved five star status. Customer conflict makes great comic television, but in the real world, unresolved customer conflict is anathema to the well-being of any business.

Customer conflict is bound to happen. This is a given. Product dissatisfaction, unfulfilled expectations, poor service, or miscommunications can all lead to customer conflict. Businesses make mistakes. Customers are not always right. We all know this. The real issue, of course, is how to best respond when these invariable conflicts arise. Since unhappy customers tend to be far more vocal than happy customers, business operators and employees who continually mishandle customer complaints will quickly discover that enough dissatisfied customers can shut down a business! Thankfully, conflict resolution is hardly a complex matter; in most cases, effective conflict resolution is simply a matter of patience and common sense.

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Resolve customer conflicts by remaining calm. Even if a customer is raising his or her voice in anger, your best move is in maintaining a calm composure. Overwrought with frustration, one may reasonably assume an irate customer simply wishes to be heard. Very well--let the customer have his or her say. Perhaps the customer wishes to provoke you; if you permit this to happen, you have fallen into the customer's snare. By allowing yourself to be provoked, changes are good that you will be the big loser. Besides, if you enter into a screaming contest with a hot-headed moron, bystanders will not be able to distinguish one angry fool from another! Stay calm. Turn the other cheek. Take the high road.

Confession is good for the soul. If you are wrong, admit to the fault. Apologize without delay or hesitation! Apologize and then set out to make restitution. A sincere apology is a balm that can heal many wounds. And by all means avoid muddling up a perfectly good apology with a long string of mindless excuses. Once you have taken ownership of the fault, work toward correcting the problem rather than doling out silly excuses! By the way, there may be occasions in which accepting someone else's blame will ultimately prove to be beneficial. So what if only you and God know that you are right and the customer is wrong? Swallowing a bit of pride never hurt anyone--and this may be the first step in transforming an angry patron into a loyal customer.

God has given us two ears but only one mouth. When disputes erupt, we should be quick to listen and slow to speak. Listen very carefully to what the other person has to say! Far too many people fail to listen--while the other person is stating his or her case, the would-be listener may be formulating a response rather than lending full attention to what is being said. No one is offended by a good listener and by allowing the other person speak, you are more likely to be afforded the same courtesy. Remember--only those who are on shaky ground try shouting down their opponents. Two good ears are better than one rampant mouth!

Could it be that the truth of the matter stands somewhere between you and your distraught customer? It may be that you and the irate person across the counter are both partially right; therefore, consider the situation from the other person's point of view. By examining a problem from another angle, formulating a compromise that is fair and reasonable to both parties becomes more likely; if a compromise cannot be worked out, both parties should pledge to disagree agreeably. A component of rational thinking is considering a problem from a number of angles. Logic and reason are good allies when seeking to resolve a conflict.

Many years ago, a young tough who roamed the mean streets of New York's Bedford Stuyvesant district threatened a young pastor at knife point. "I don't like preachers," he snarled. Today, this former street gang leader pastors a prominent church. So what is the point? Learn to look at everyone--even the angry, red-faced person seeking to provoke you--as someone who is loved by God. For all you and I know, this person may be destined for greatness. The Apostle Paul, prior to his conversion, was an angry little Pharisee who went about persecuting Christian believers. As a chaplain, I am not particularly keen on those who persecute members of my faith, but I must remember that the most prolific New Testament writer was a former Christian hater. There is hope for everyone and this includes the hot-tempered customer with the bloodshot eyes!

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A number of years ago, someone I did not know swaggered into my office and greeted me with a sarcastic countenance and an ultimatum laced with crude vulgarities. I calmly explained that I did not make a habit of entertaining dirty-mouth guests who were so obviously void of civility. I then asked my difficult guest to leave and returned my attention to a stack of paperwork. The person blinked once or twice and humbly apologized. From then on, our conversation remained low-toned and wholly civil. A yeller or a screamer or a purveyor of verbal filth should be kept on a short leash. If an out of control tirade continues, end the conversation. Nothing is likely to be resolved until both parties are calm and reasonable. For those who will not calm down, there is always the door. "Before this gets out of hand, I must insist that you leave. If you choose to calm down later, please return and I will be happy discussing the matter with you, but now is obviously not the time."

When I was a young man, I overheard my employer tell a sales representative, "Anyone can make a sale. Prove to me that you know how to make a customer!" And he was right! Anyone can make a sale, but only a real professional knows how to make and maintain customers who keep coming back. Good customer service is the life blood of any business; mishandling customer complaints is the surest way of hemorrhaging the vital life blood that allows a business to keep its doors open year after year.

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