

Effectively handling angry customers

In customer service workshops I conduct, I include information on how to effectively handle an angry customer. I'm knowledgeable about the subject because of research I've done, and because I have at times been an angry customer and I know what did and did not work for those who tried to handle me.

Unfortunately, yesterday was one of those times. Fortunately, the customer service representative handled me just right (and while she was doing it, the HR voice in my head was commending her for it).

This is what she did. First, she let me rant about my situation and how I felt about it without interrupting me. Using a tone that matched mine, she repeated back to me what I had told her. This might sound silly, but using the same words let me know that she had heard me and using the same intensity in her tone let me know that she felt my pain. I became less angry. Then she apologized for the situation even though she had not caused it, and told me what she would do to solve my problem. I was no longer angry.

These are not behaviors that work just for me. Most experts' advice on how to effectively handle an angry customer include the same steps:

- Listen actively. Let the angry customer tell his/her story without interruption. Focus on the customer (don't look at your watch, phone, computer, or other people), and ensure your facial expression, body language and tone of voice demonstrate that you understand that the customer is upset. This doesn't mean you have to get upset too—just don't smile at customers while they are telling you how angry they are.

- Repeat what the customer said, using as similar language as possible. For example, "You were told on the phone that we have the item in stock and you're frustrated because it is not here as promised."

- Apologize even when it's not your fault. "I'm really sorry that the item is not here."

- Present a solution or ask the customer what they would like to do to resolve the situation. "I can check with our other stores and see if they have a similar item if



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you would like me to."

- Take action and follow up. "Our store in Tehachapi has a similar item and we can have it in our store tomorrow for you."

- End on a positive note. "I'm sorry again for the inconvenience. I'll call you as soon as we receive the item, and we'll put it in the store room with your name on it to ensure it's here when you arrive."

Of course, not every customer service story has a happy ending like this one. So, if you can't easily resolve the issue, ask if there's anything you can do to make the customer happy. "I'm so sorry, but none of our stores have a similar item. Is there another item that you are interested in that I can help you find? No? I'm sorry again for the inconvenience and if you call again to see if we have something in stock, we'll be sure to put it on hold for you so this doesn't happen again."

Finally, if a customer is so angry that she is cursing or calling you names, end the interaction by saying something like this: "I'd really like to help you, but I'm not going to allow you to talk to me this way. Please leave the store and come back when you're ready for us to work together to resolve the issue."

Customers become angry mostly because they feel like their needs are not being met. Meet their needs by showing that you care and taking action to solve their problem. Just taking those steps can turn the situation around and make an angry customer into a happy customer.

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