

# 10 Tips for Dealing with Customer Complaints

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Anyone who has a business has had the experience of dealing with customer complaints. While listening to a complaining customer is not something most people enjoy, a complaining customer can be an organization's friend – if they try to learn from the complaint.

There are lots of things customers can complain about – communication breakdowns, process failures, faulty products, rude employees, and unclean facilities – just to name a few. If taken seriously these seemingly annoying encounters can shed revelation on areas in the organization that needs improvement.

For example, if a customer complains about an employee who is rude on the telephone, it might heighten the awareness of the need to do telephone training for those employees who answer the phone.

## So, what is the correct way to respond to a complaining customer?

### 1. Acknowledge the Complaint

Complaining customers have a perception that somehow their needs and expectations were not met. The first step in diffusing the emotion of an upset customer is to acknowledge their concern.

For example: “Mr. Jones, I understand that your food was not cooked to your expectations”.

Simply acknowledging their perceived issue will begin the process of turning the situation around.

### 2. Don't Take It Personal

One of the most difficult aspects of listening to customer complaints is having the ability to separate yourself from the issue. When someone is yelling at you, it is difficult to not take it personally.

However, it is important to remember that the complaint is not about you; it is about a perception of a need that was not met. Focus on the customer perception (it is real to them) and you will be better able to take yourself out of the equation.

### 3. Apologize

An apology is the next tool you can use to diffuse an upset customer. Apologizing with sincerity can do a lot to help ease the tension of high emotions. Look the customer in the eye, smile, and sincerely apologize. Communicate that you acknowledge that their issue is important and that you want to make things right for them.

For example, “Ms. Smith, I am sorry that you did not have a good experience”. Make sure you show sincerity – as most people can tell the difference between patronizing and sincerity. Show that you care.

## 4. Maintain Positive Communication

Try to keep your facial expressions and responses as positive as possible when you are listening to a complaining customer. Do not do anything that could cause a more emotional response and make matters worse. Be as pleasant as possible as you try to resolve the issue for the customer.

For example, think about your facial expressions and don't inadvertently add fuel to the fire by rolling your eyes or having an uncaring smirk on your face.

## 5. Work Toward a Solution

Allow the customer to vent and explain their issue. Allowing them to throw off some steam will naturally defuse their emotions. This is a good time to try and gather all the details of the situation and determine where the breakdown happened.

Sometimes there are minor misunderstandings or breakdowns in communication that can create an emotional response to a situation. Find out the facts and then try to understand what the customer wants.

## 6. Give the Customer Options

An upset customer is not interested in what you can't do, so focus on what you can do. You probably won't always be able to do exactly what the customer wants but there is always something you can do.

Focus on what you can offer the customer. Customers don't necessarily want to hear the why behind an issue; they just want their problem solved. Try to offer a couple of options for things you can do to fix the situation for them.

For example, "Mr. Smith I understand you did not like the salad you were served, what I can do is ask the Chef to remake it, or is there something else on the menu you would like instead?"

When you offer options for resolution, you provide the customer with some level of control over the situation.

## 7. Document and Track Complaints

It is important to document and track complaints. There are formal complaint tracking systems that can help you keep track of complaints.

Document the following:

- Date
- Time
- Description of the complaint
- Employees involved

- What the customer wanted
- What was offered to the customer
- Was the issue resolved
- Follow-up with the customer at a later time.

Make a point to follow-up with a customer after the fact to ensure that their issue was resolved to their satisfaction.

## **8. Trend Complaints**

Collecting complaint data can help provide the information needed to resolve systemic problems that may not be as evident without supporting data.

As an example, if you continually get the same complaint about the same employee, there may be an issue with the employee and the way they provide a service or respond to customer needs.

Complaints could be the result of a training issue or a performance issue. Complaint data is also helpful information to have during the performance appraisal process.

## **9. Don't Overreact to Outliers**

Sometimes things happen and should be classified as outliers. As an example, if a storm hits and the power goes out and affects the electronic registers causing long wait times at the checkout, the long waits are an outlier and should not necessarily give cause for creating a new process.

However, looking into backup power issues and working toward a proactive plan to ensure the operation is sustainable in the absence of power can be a way to eliminate future issues.

## **10 Service Recovery**

There is a theory that if there is an effort to recover from a bad service experience, the customer will be more loyal to the organization. Create a service recovery process and empower employees to take action and offer solutions to customers for bad service experiences.

### **Always Be Fair**

Finally, customers are human and deserved to be treated fairly and with dignity and respect. However, a customer that crosses the line of appropriate communication, specifically cursing and threatening should not be tolerated. Good communication skills in response to a complaint can help minimize angry emotions.

Anyone in business understands the importance of retaining a loyal customer base and, regardless of how fine-tuned an organization is there will be times when systems, products, or communications fail. Creating a process to respond, manage, and recover from a bad service experience is the secret to successful businesses.