

The Upset Customer

...What "Winning" Really Means

By Cheryl Crumb

"This product doesn't work!"
 "My TV was damaged in transit."
 "You said it would be easy to install...it's impossible."
 "This was supposed to have arrived yesterday...It's still not here."

The above is the voice of the upset customer. Pitch is high, speed is fast, and the tone is definitely unfriendly. Like an arrow heading to our heart, it causes us to gulp, sweat and wish The Ring could make us invisible.

Working with angry or frustrated customers is definitely not easy, but it is a learnable skill. Unfortunately, nature conspires against us when we respond to the above from our autopilot. We say things like:

"If you follow the instruction book, it will work fine."

"Perhaps somebody in your house banged against it."

"It is easy to install...you just need to make sure you're doing everything in the right sequence."

"We tried to deliver it yesterday afternoon, but nobody answered the doorbell."

Like a cornered beast, our instincts cause us to respond in one of two ways. Hans Selye called these the "Fight" and "Flight" responses. Fighting means we argue, blame and defend ourselves. Fleeing means we ignore, hide or dump the problem on a colleague. Neither is effective, but after 20-30-40-and 50 years of practice, these are our predictable retorts. Can we get ourselves out of this pattern and into something more effective? Of course!

Put yourself in the customer's position. You've just spent \$XXXX on an expensive entertainment toy. You've been excited for weeks about finally buying it. You convinced your spouse that you MUST have it. It finally arrives and something's wrong.

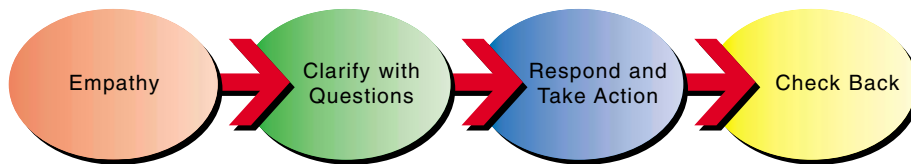
What are you feeling: Anger? Frustration? Disappointment? All of those emotions make sense in the situation.

That brings us to rule #1 in dealing with upset customers. Validate people's feelings.

Always convey empathy before you say or do anything else. Empathy is a sincere, genuine response that shows you appreciate the customer's feelings. It is not a rehearsed or scripted "Calm down. I know how you feel" reply. (The customer will usually respond, "No, you don't!!"). To be genuine, we must metaphysically place ourselves in the customer's place. Appropriate words, accompanied by an authentic caring tone and body language, might include:

"You're obviously upset. Let's see what we can do to work this out."

"This must be extremely disappointing. I can understand why you're frustrated."



"There's nothing more annoying than when things don't work right."

"I know how much you've been waiting for it."

An empathetic response usually encourages the customer to vent...which in spite of what you might think is a good thing! Customers have been bottling up their feelings so they need a caring ear to hear them out.

That leads us to rule #2: Ask questions to clarify. When customers initially cry out, we're only hearing the tip of the iceberg. No ship captain would maneuver around that ice mass without knowing more about what's underneath the surface. The same is true of skilled service providers. We need to uncover what the customer has not said so that we can learn more about the situation. Consider:

"Please, tell me more."

"Could you give me some more background please?"

"What have you done so far?"

"Walk me through this from the beginning."

Let's consider the magic in these first two steps. We're showing the customer we're on his side... because subconsciously he's expecting a fight; we're getting beyond the first outburst and gaining necessary information. And, most importantly, through

talking to an empathetic ear, he's starting to calm down. The emotion that has blocked his hearing is slowly unblocking. That means he's getting ready to hear what you have to say.

Rule #3: Respond and take action. Now that you know what the problem is, you're ready to deal with it. The customer needs to hear information, action and a valid commitment. Use words that will show him that you will take personal responsibility for solving the problem. There is one thing that the customer doesn't want to hear: excuses! Remember, the only person who believes an excuse is the person giving it. Excuses usually convey that "it wasn't my fault", and

consequently they're followed by nothing more powerful than a "sorry". So, get rid of excuses and instead concentrate on action. If you can't make a

promise of delivery/repair/assistance immediately, at least make a commitment to the customer to recontact him at X time with an action plan. Then, make sure you get back to him at the appointed time. If there are several possible actions you could take, indeed, offer them to the customer. Customers with choice feel renewed control.

Rule #4: Check back with the customer. This is usually done in two parts, first immediately, to see if the customer is satisfied with the action plan. Secondly, after the action plan has been enacted (new delivery, repair completed), call the customer back and ensure that all is well. This is a simple step, but a highly leveraged one for it communicates the message "you are important".

The real moral of the story: the complaining customer is a gift from the gods so we must treat him that way. At least he's giving you the opportunity to make things better. The worst customer? The one who doesn't complain....but just leaves....to find another provider.

Research says it's six times more expensive to find new customers than keep old ones. Using the process I've defined increases the likelihood that customers will come back.