



Anatomy of an Angry Customer

As we've discussed in earlier articles, you should not consider angry customers to be the bane of your company's business. They are, in fact, oftentimes the catalyst or stepping stone to helping you improve your business to the next level of quality. Therefore, it behooves you as a businessperson or a service agent, to brace yourself, suck it up, and listen to (and actually *hear*) what your angry customer has to say.

When an angry customer contacts you or your business, there are four elements that absolutely need to be addressed, with care and urgency.

1. The Issue at hand – what brought on this anger in the first place?
2. The Anger itself – how to handle the interpersonal aspect of dealing with an angry person?
3. The Resolution – how will you rectify this situation to the customer's satisfaction?
4. Going Forward – what changes/safeguards will you put in place to ensure this problem does not again anger this, or another, customer?

We will look at these issues one at a time, but please realize that in the heat of the moment, you may very well have to juggle more than one of them at once.

The Issue at Hand

Different people's blood boils at different temperatures, and for different reasons. As a service provider, your job is not to evaluate the appropriateness of a customer's anger, but rather, to take it seriously, and remedy the situation as swiftly as possible. Whether a major mistake has occurred, or simply a typo, if it angers a customer, it is worthy of your immediate attention. Studies have repeatedly shown that customers who have had a problem resolved by a company are more loyal than those customers who

have *never* experienced a problem with that company. So here is your chance to gain a dedicated customer! Get to it!

Identify the source of the anger. Is it because of an error your company made, or because of the result of an error your company made? You need to figure this out as early in the discussion as possible, because you want to be sure that you are addressing the correct source of the customer's anger. It may not be the typo that angers the customer; it may be that in this instance, the typo caused the widgets to be delivered to the wrong address, which happened to be the customer's competitor, who now knows that they are ordering widgets, and now had a pretty good idea of what their next product will be. In this instance, apologizing for a typo may further enrage the customer, and rightly so. You should be apologizing for a serious mis-delivery that your typo caused.

The Anger

No one likes having someone angry with them. It is uncomfortable, awkward, and unpleasant. However, as a service provider, you do not have the right to object to a customer's anger. In any business relationship, the customer is the one who *pays* to be part of that relationship; the service provider *gets paid* to be part of that relationship. Therefore, the service provider must tolerate the customer's anger, whether or not he/she feels it is justified. These are the rules of the game, folks. Providing great customer service often requires a thick skin.

OK, so now that we've agreed that the customer has a right to his/her anger, the service provider needs to let them express it fully. Do not try to jump directly to a solution in the hopes of cutting the anger off at the pass. You will ultimately only prolong, and probably increase, the anger by trying to nip it in the bud. Instead, let the customer get it all out – they earned the right, remember? Once they've expressed their dissatisfaction, and you understand details of the problem, then you can get to work on a remedy.

The Resolution

Resolving customer issues is often easier than it looks. Most customers are *not* greedy opportunists, looking for service loopholes where they can reach their grubby little paws into your till and grab a handful. In actuality, most customers simply want the product or service that they came to you in the first place for. If, following a glitch, you can provide that to them quickly and without a lot of hoops to jump through, most customers will be satisfied. If you can provide that solution quickly and

easily, *and* throw in a freebie of some sort as an acknowledgement of the customer's inconvenience, you will then more than likely gain the customer's loyalty.

This freebie doesn't have to be monumental, but it should have *some* value. A tee-shirt or a cap or a pen trumpeting your business serves as free advertising for you, but it really doesn't serve the customer. Most people already have plenty of tee-shirts and caps and pens. But offering an immediate significant discount on the price of purchase of the product or service in question, or a free upgrade in service, or free delivery of product sends a number of great messages to the customer:

- We're sorry for the inconvenience you've suffered.
- We value you and want to keep you as a customer.
- We want to make amends *now*, not just bait you into coming back later.

Sometimes the customer is a bit more put out over the problem. Sometimes the problem ended up causing great inconvenience, cost, or embarrassment to the customer. In these cases, a freebie probably will not make the pain go away. You will need to have a frank discussion with the customer, and ask him or her exactly how you can make this situation right. There may be considerable expense and effort needed on your part, and this is where you must take stock of your business and your business' reputation.

Your customer should never have to lose or waste money due to your error. You should be prepared to make complete restitution for expenses incurred by your customer, due to this problem. While to some, this is baseline business procedure, it is remarkable how many businesses still see this as a point to fight or negotiate over. These businesses can kiss the wronged customers goodbye. During that goodbye kiss, the businesses should do a little math, to see exactly what they are kissing goodbye:

- The revenue from that customer, over a lifetime
- The revenue of many, if not all, of that customer's colleagues, over a lifetime
- The goodwill and reputation of your business, if not throughout your industry, at least within the customer's circle of associates

In most cases, stepping up to the plate and offering to take the hit for your customer makes more financial sense over the long term. Stand behind your business; stand up for your customers. Doing so is not cheap, but it will provide you with a reputation that will serve you well.

Going Forward

It's one thing to solve a customer's problem. It's quite another to ensure that the problem does not recur. Nothing will make an angry customer angrier than to have the same problem rear its ugly head more than once. Remember those loyal customers we spoke of earlier, who have had their problem successfully resolved? Well, they will become *former* loyal customers so fast your head will spin, if their problem resurfaces. Even the most forgiving customers will not suffer the same problem multiple times from a service provider. They will feel disrespected and taken advantage of, and rightly so.

Just as importantly as resolving the issue at hand is fixing the problem so that it does not happen again. You may not always be able to do this on the fly. But it is good idea to enlist the help of the wronged customer. In fact, many of them will offer these kinds of suggestions while they are initially blowing off the steam of their anger. This is why it is important to let the wronged customer have his/her say, and why it is crucial to actually hear what they are saying. They will often paint you a clear picture of the difference between what they were expecting, and what your business delivered. You, as a service provider, must make it your point to bridge that chasm, so that other customers do not land there.

It is a fact of life that periodically, customers will be angry about something that did not live up to their expectations. Your job as a businessperson is to minimize the number and frequency of these problems, to rectify them as quickly and completely as possible, and to fix processes so that they do not occur in the future. Doing this will put you at the head of the class of exceptional customer service providers.

-- Charles Dennis

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