



## **Defusing Upset Customers**

### ***Turning Anger into More Business***

Angry, distraught calls or visits are every Customer Service Representative's (CSR's) nightmare. I recently called the company that made our air cleaning machine to swap-out a box of new filters. They had sent me the wrong ones the previous week. Without even listening to what I needed the guy on the other end had told me that they only made one type of filter and he would send me a box. Well, they don't make just one model. Now I was calling the 800-number to get these switched for the correct ones.

The moment the CSR heard my problem, she sent for her supervisor. When he came to the phone, he greeted me warmly and said, "I'm very sorry that we put you through this, Mr. Mathis. Lola tells me that you got the wrong filters!" I was relieved and he offered me an extra box at no charge for being reasonable. I asked why she asked him to step in (since usually the Supervisor deals with angry, upset callers) and he said that she was shocked that I had gotten the wrong product and wanted him to handle it; but she emphatically told him, "Mr. Mathis is not angry."

Upset customers call toll free service centers and storm complaint counters every day. Did you know that the more upset someone is who calls or comes in to complain, the more likely you are to retain their business? It's true. Dissatisfied customers who never complain are more likely to take their business elsewhere. You should welcome complaints as an opportunity to serve. You will discover mistakes that have been made by your organization. Look on complaints as warning lights on your dashboard. We hate to see them, but they are giving us important messages we need to understand for the car to function properly. The same is true for complaints. Welcome them to help you serve better in the future.

Don't you wish you had a way to defuse the anger and turn these concerns into a happy customer/sales experience? Don't you wish you knew how to take the disgruntled complainers and turn them into our most loyal supporters? Have no fear! Help is on the way. Here are 7.5 ways to take the ticking time bomb (maybe it's already going off) and defuse it before serious damage is done. These steps

will turn difficult situations into positive experiences for both you and your customers almost every time.

**1. Remain calm** Remember, anger like any attitude is a choice. People choose to be angry. They are in control of themselves more than you think, because they chose this negative attitude. Think about the last time you were angry. Didn't you feel out of control? But you were in control. You and only you control your feelings and reactions to others. Some upset people want to draw you in to their pool of anger to keep the conversation on their playing field. "A soft answer turns away wrath." It is difficult to keep arguing when the person you are talking to is smiling and calm.

Certain personality types (High D's on a DiSC Profile) sound angry when they really are just being firm. We get sucked in to their attitude and we try to out shout them. Nobody wins. Learn to calmly state phrases like: "Uh huh," "I understand," "I see." Everyone wants to be understood and sometimes they simply need an opportunity to vent. The worst thing you can do as a CSR is take their comments personally. even if the upset party gets too personal you still can say in a calm reassuring voice, "Sir, or Ma'am, I'm trying to help you. I can't do it if you are fighting me." Now there is no reason to take obscenities or abuse, but those cases are rare and will be rarer if you apply this step to begin with. If the language gets out of hand, firmly and calmly state what you will and will not tolerate to help solve their problem.

**2. Ask Questions** The biggest mistake I see in the way Customer Service Representatives deal with people is they try to solve the problem too soon without enough information. Get out of problem solving mode. Become an investigator. Remember the old television program, *Columbo* Peter Falk would wear the murderer down by asking question, after question? People want to be heard. Stop talking and listen to their needs and concerns. Find out what the real problem is and address it. Learn to ask leading questions--the kind that great sales people employ. What do I mean by leading questions? Questions that don't elicit a "Yes" or "No" answer, but require a discussion. Questions that make the person tell their side of the story, or describe their problem. This puts you in the position of hearing them out with a sympathetic ear. It helps cool the flames because you are the one person who is listening to them. It also puts YOU in control of the conversation. *Remember, the person asking the questions controls the dialogue.* Make that person you!

**3. Acknowledgement** While you are practicing active listening by saying saying, "Uh huh," "I understand," "I see" begin agreeing that they have a right to be upset with their poor service or product. "I know how frustrated you are," "I can see why this has upset you." Don't sell out your company. Don't say how bad working conditions are, or your bad impressions of fellow employees, or your organization's product. Above all don't blame it on the sales team--they work with you, as partners. If one member of the organization speaks negatively about

other members, it benefits no one. Agree with the angry customer's point of view regarding their understanding of the problem. Allow the upset party to feel like their concerns are registering without losing your own temper.

Most of the time, people get angry because they feel like they aren't being heard. They take it up a notch to get your attention. They become angry because they feel out of control. Agreement gives them the idea that you are with them in spirit. After a while you will notice (and so will they) that *it is hard to argue with someone who is agreeing with you*. It lets them see how ridiculous their show of temper is coming across and will more quickly calm them down. Remember, too that sometimes people act angry when they really aren't just to get your attention. Acknowledgement tells them they've got your attention, but not your panic button.

**4. DiSC®'em** Remember how different personalities react to conflict? Use your DiSC® Training to determine the type of messages the upset individual is sending you. Never bump heads or try to wrestle for control with a High D (agree with them); never get into a fact-checking argument with a High C (Understand them); listen to the High i (tell them how others have reacted or sympathize with them) and always empathize with a High S, as you hear the signals each is giving you. *You can't fail if you speak the language their personality, behavior style defaults to*. Remember your own personality strengths in communication and try to limit your own desire to fight for control or get in the last word. If you are a High i, they won't care about your matching story of frustration, even if they have the same personality style. Your primary goal in superior customer service is to mitigate their need by listening and getting all of the available information, which leads to...

**5. Just the facts** Speaking of television detective shows, remember *Dragnet*? Remember Jack Webb's character saying, "Just the facts, ma'am?" Upset people tend to stray off the subject and can't tell the difference between the facts and their feelings. When this happens you will lose the argument because it is not based on anything you have responsibility for or control over. *Angry people don't think or act rationally*. They say things they would never say in a calm mood. They don't listen well to logical responses. Bear this in mind and you will be less likely to take what they say personally. Keep them focused on why they called and what specifically is wrong. If they get into a feeling conversation, re-state the last fact they gave and ask for the next fact that follows that. Which leads us to...

**6. Restate** Repeat what they say. As each concern is expressed, repeat it back either verbatim or in an accurate manner that conveys the information they have relayed to you. When I have been my angriest about poor service it has been compounded by the CSR not understanding what the problem is. *By restating what you hear, you are letting them know you understand. You are thinking about what their problem is*. And you are buying time to allow them to cool down. Listening to a problem is an important use of time even if you can't do anything to resolve their problem. You may use this opportunity to rationally think of a

solution to their problem. This is another way of agreeing with the upset individual that gets them to feel like you are on their side. Think back on the best customer service you have received. Wasn't it when the problem was restated back to you that you felt like they understood your concerns?

**7. Anything else?** Don't offer assistance until you know everything that your customer knows. Ask if they have any other concerns they haven't expressed. Most of the time they won't, but if they do, this is when you will earn their respect. Dig deeper into their entire experience of your product or service. Find out how other areas of your organization are meeting their needs. Ask them to stop and think if there are any other concerns they have that weren't expressed. Again, this serves to not only calm them down, it reassures them that you are attempting to help them. You are showing concern for their continued business. This step will keep them as customers for the future. *Statistics show that complainers who's full needs are met are twice as likely to stay with a brand or company as those who never complained.* This is yet another reason you want to welcome complaints.

**8. Meet real needs.** Find the best solution to solve their problem based on your extensive investigation with them in the conversation. If it involves referring them to someone else take them there personally, or three-way call to the individual who will work out their problem. Introduce them to the supervisor, tech support specialist, or problem-solver. If it is you, offer discounts, free service or whatever you are allowed to do based on their loyal patronage. Reward their calm behavior, not their anger. This can be like working with Pavlov's dog. Let them know that you are pleased to help them out and keep their business once they are calm and rational.

**8.5 Follow up.** Call them back at a pre-arranged time to see how their problem is. Greet them as an old friend. Were their concerns met? Is there anything that wasn't taken care of that you can do for them? Find out how well they feel their concerns were met. Ask more questions. How may we serve you better in the future? Once again, you are taking the initiative. You are in control of the process. You are finding ways to serve your customer better for many years to come--along satisfying future. Encourage them to call you back, personally the next time they have a problem or complaint. You will be surprised at how they respond to your initiative.

A satisfying experience in customer service is the key to increasing your profits. Great service welcomes complaints as opportunities to serve and almost guarantees repeat business. It gets word of mouth advertising (the least expensive and the most rewarding) going in your favor. It ensures continued business and referrals. So welcome the complaints. Practice these techniques and watch your business grow.

***Permission is granted to reprint this article provided the following paragraph is included in full:***

**Jim Mathis, CSP is an international Certified Speaking Professional, executive coach and trainer. To subscribe to his free personal and professional development newsletter, please send an email to: [subscribe@jimmathis.com](mailto:subscribe@jimmathis.com) with the word SUBSCRIBE in the subject. An electronic copy will be sent out to you every month. For more information on how Jim and his programs can benefit your organization or group, please call 888-688-0220, or visit his web site: [www.jimmathis.com](http://www.jimmathis.com).**