

When the Going Gets Tough with the Customer

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Picture that you have answered the phone and the caller begins with a raised voice. Without any seeming provocation, the person on the other end of the line starts making threatening statements and even swearing. How do you defend yourself against this mad, out of control caller? Should you just hang-up and hope that someone other than you gets to deal with the individual next time? A common sense approach, coupled with TLC and good listening skills, typically works. Someone who is angry IS capable of behaving calmly and rationally.

It is important to understand why a person begins a conversation with such an aggressive stance. Often, it is because he or she has waited in cue for an enormously long time, or something your company has done has greatly inconvenienced them or cost them money. For example, maybe because the wrong product was shipped, sub-contractors on a construction site couldn't begin but had to be paid anyway. If you put yourself in the disruptive caller's shoes, you can be more empathetic and focused on resolving the upsetting issue. Without trying to understand the individual's behavior, you risk matching their bad conduct with statements such as, *"Don't take it out on me"* or *"You need to calm down."*

Let the angry caller ventilate without interruption. When someone is upset, they need to get it out. Then, when it is appropriate to jump in, console the caller with statements like, *"I understand," "That's terrible,"* or *"It must be so frustrating."* If you take a moment to pause and collect your own thoughts, you will respond more tactfully and less defensively or emotionally.

When you ask for information, explain why you need it. *"May I have your policy number so I can review what is covered?" "Can I have your purchase order so I can see what happened and who took the order?"* Remember to ask simple, very direct questions. *"When you tried to start it, what happened?" "When did they say you would receive shipment?"*

People who are emotionally charged have difficulty processing complex information so keep your explanations short and simple also.

As angry callers share information, demonstrate that you are listening. *"Okay."* *"Yes."* *"I see."* Be sure to clarify anything you don't understand. Take notes so you can be accurate and verify what you hear or are sensing. Do not become distracted by others around you or try to do two things at once. This will only inflame the angry caller. The more attentive you are, the more open callers will be to what you have to say.

To resolve the issue, be sure to ask the customer what he or she would like to see happen. Do not make assumptions. We may think the person is looking for remuneration, but maybe reassurance that it won't happen again is all that is necessary. Try to be as flexible as you can about deadlines or shipping costs. Use pro-active language. *"We will definitely get this out immediately. I will personally walk this re-order over to shipping to make sure there are no glitches."* Get agreement before disconnecting.

If an issue cannot be resolved quickly, promise to update the caller on the progress and be true to your word. If you involve a third party, make sure not to abandon the caller and make sure the third party is updated before the call is transferred. The individual will notice.

Customers have choices today. Their loyalty depends on how you treat them in challenging situations. While there is no magic solution to out of control customers, a common sense approach, coupled with TLC and good listening skills, is definitely your best bet.

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