

Dealing with difficult customers

By Sally Wright

IS it a case of dealing with difficult customers, or simply providing quality customer service? The two subjects are inextricably linked.

Just the fact that you're reading and taking an interest in this article possibly indicates you've either been on the receiving end of a difficult customer or you've adopted the position yourself at one time or another.

Difficult customers are a fact of life. Our fascination with this emotionally charged creature seems never to flag. They come in all shapes and sizes, and share a variety of backgrounds. And of course, we'd all like to know how to cope with them a little better the next time around.

Are your customers (that is everyone you deal with) forced into behaving in a difficult fashion in order to receive attention and adequate service? Certainly, service comprises both systems and people, but let's not forget it is people who create the systems. Catch phrases such as "... but it is company policy" or "I'm afraid there is nothing I can do, my hands are tied ..." do not hold up any longer. If this is the mind-set in your organisation, then it is time for change.

Organisations must provide the opportunity for staff to understand and grasp the value of difficult customers to the business. The points that must be stressed are as follows:

Finding a new customer costs four or five times more than retaining an existing one. Most dissatisfied customers will not complain, or confront you, rather unbeknown to you they will simply take their business elsewhere. The average business does not hear from over 90 per cent of its unhappy customers.

Don't undermine the value of word of mouth publicity. One dissatisfied customer will tell, on average, around seven other people of their experience. Each complaint registered represents over 20 other customers who do not register their complaints, with at least 25 per cent of these cases being serious.

Difficult customers provide an opportunity for organisations to identify areas that require improvement. A valid complaint may be disguised by unpleasant behaviour. Difficult customers provide us with an opportunity to see our products and services from the customers point of view — and remember it's their point of view that really matters. You

never know, you may even discover ideas for new products and services or even ideas for improving company procedures and staff training.

A customer whose problem has been properly resolved is likely to return and do business with you again, not to mention telling others about the happy ending to their experience. Those customers who have not registered a complaint are the least likely group to do business with you in the future. You will never again see a single sen from approximately 75 per cent of the silent types.

When it comes to difficult customers, knowing how to accept and address their complaints is vital for any organisation aiming for success. You may not relish the thought of difficult or complaining customers but you cannot afford to ignore them or the issue they represent. If your company receives few or no complaints then perhaps it is time you started to investigate.

The good news is that happy customers require less time and resources than unhappy customers and cause a lot less stress. The happier your customers, the happier you will be and the higher the quality of the service you provide. This creates a win-win-win situa-

tion. Service providers win due to the improved working environment, increased job satisfaction and the decrease in stress. The organisation wins because happy customers return and recommend your company to others. The customers win because they receive the very best service.

What is your reaction when customers become angry and hold you responsible for problems that are not your fault? In this situation most people tend to either withdraw or evade the situation or become aggressive towards the customer.

Both types of reaction have helped human beings cope with stressful circumstances throughout time, but unfortunately these instinctive reactions are not suitable when dealing with customers.

Customers consider those who are aggressive and argumentative as rude and unhelpful. Those service providers who submit and evade are considered ineffective and a waste of time when it comes to solving problems. Customers are human beings too. They don't always react the way they should or the way you'd ideally like them to. They can make mistakes, behave in an irrational manner and be very rude. These

types of reactions from both customers and service providers are quite normal but create a no-win situation for all concerned.

As business success is dependent upon retaining existing customers and attracting new ones, everyone must be encouraged to develop the appropriate skills for dealing with difficult customers.

There is quite a lot of information available on the do's and don'ts of dealing with difficult customers. This information can be found in various publications, training programmes devoted to this topic and from experienced colleagues or friends. Today there are even a number of programmes covering all aspects of customer service available on CD-ROM. The message is always consistent and although no advice can be considered hard and fast, when it comes to managing difficult customers, there are recommended methods that have endured over the years.

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HERE are some suggestions should you ever find yourself in the predicament of having to deal with an abusive customer or someone who seems more intent on insulting you than in having his or her problem solved. It is important to remain calm. Try to remember it is the situation they are angry about, not you. Don't take insults personally. A suitable end result must take priority. Try moving the discussion away from what has happened in the past and focus on a positive future result. You have no control over the past but you can influence the future. Find out how your customer would like the situation to be resolved.

In unusual circumstances where the customer continues to be abusive and opposes all attempts to discuss a solution, you have no choice but to politely end the discussion. Suggest that both parties take time to cool off before recommencing the discussion. If the customer continues to persist, then it is time to include in the discussion a suitable third party such as your manager.

Predictably, any interaction such as this leaves all those involved feeling an-

gry. It requires a high degree of self-management to deal with the anger. Avoid getting angry with yourself. Only you can control how you behave so concentrate on being calm and helpful. Avoid giving customers a straight out "no", instead explain why you may not be able to meet the customer's request and suggest some alternative solutions. Take responsibility for resolving the situation yourself, don't pass the buck or blame someone else in the company. The customer just wants the problem solved; he is not interested in where the fault lies. Whatever you do, don't be tempted to make commitments you cannot meet just to take the sting out of the situation. The consequences will return to haunt you.

The true professional shows difficult customers empathy through patience and understanding. They allow the customer to get things off their chest before attempting to resolve the problem. They give their own name as a personal contact as well as find out and use the customer's name as soon as possible. This high level of service excellence requires effective communication skills to get to the heart of the situation, identify the customer's ideal solution and discuss how it may be achieved. The motto is to promise what you know you can deliver and wherever possible, exceed your customers expectations.

Being human means customers make mistakes too. You may realise they are mistaken or have used a product incorrectly. In this case, the situation must be handled carefully without any loss of face to the customer. Discuss the situation rather than apportioning blame. Find out how the product has actually been used rather than immediately pointing out what the customer may have been doing incorrectly. Encourage a full description of how the situation developed before you suggest what should have been done. Customers deserve a second chance, after all, you may think the directions are quite clear but consider them from the differing perspectives of all your customers. Use

phrases such as: "Now let me clarify what we've agreed will happen from here". This allows both parties to check and confirm agreement.

As a professional you should have a good understanding of the company's policy and your customer's legal rights. This will allow you to make recommendations suitable to both parties. In some cases, it may be useful to let your customer know how the situation has been resolved in the past for others in a similar position. When appropriate, it may make customers feel a little more secure if you remind them of how you've been able to help them on previous occasions.

Beware, the same problems will continue to recur with other customers if you treat the symptom and not the cause. It is vital that you alert your company to the problem and any commitments you have made to resolve the issue. Make suggestions as to how the situation may be prevented in the future, after all, it will save you a lot of headaches in the future.

If you aim to thoroughly explore the reasons as to why customers are difficult to handle at times, then it is worth considering some of the possible contributing factors.

Pressures of this "modern era", the nature of different industries, the availability of appropriate resources as well as our own reaction to any given situation, all influence both the circumstances and the customer's behaviour.

Dealing with difficult customers may prove to be an exercise in self-management. It is likely that the way in which we ourselves react to different people and circumstances is the same manner adopted by our customers, difficult or otherwise. To coin the old adage, it may be a case of putting the shoe on the other foot whilst taking a long hard look at yourself.

We are now firmly entrenched in what is known as the "service era". In times past, during the agricultural and industrial revolutions, people purchased goods that others made or

grew. Nowadays, people buy or pay for the things we do. Our value is our expertise and the service we provide to both our internal and external customers. The higher the quality of our expertise and service, the greater the reward. Wherever you go, whatever you do, you come into contact with people and the concept known as service. There is no escape.

At times this era has been dubbed the "disposable era", here today and gone tomorrow. This sentiment applies to a whole gamut of things, from razor blades to high fashion. Product life cycles are becoming increasingly limited as the pace of change continues to gain momentum. The pressure builds. Variations between the different product features continue to diminish leaving service as the only point of difference between one company and another. Many customers will go out of their way to do business with an individual or company simply because they like and trust them, not because they find a great difference in the product offered.

The situation is further exacerbated by shortages in skilled labour coupled with a work force psyche of job-hopping. Employees are continually asked to do more with less. This may cause strain on the amount of time service providers are able to spend with customers. Consequently, the quality of the service we offer becomes absolutely vital to success in business. Service quality is a philosophy that should govern and guide our every action.

While a tremendous amount of any company's resources is invested into securing new customers, maintaining customer loyalty is paramount to the success of all organisations. Not only do we need to avoid losing customers to our competitors, we cannot afford to waste the precious resources required to replace lost customers.

Take heed and the next time you're faced with a difficult customer, take advantage of the opportunity.

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