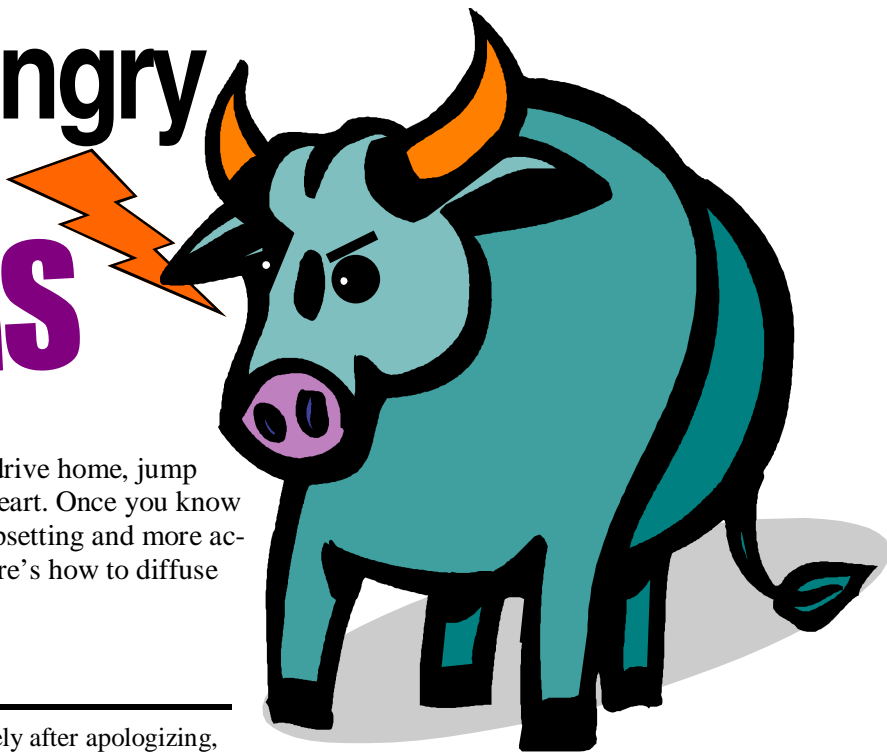


Dealing with Angry and Difficult CUSTOMERS



If dealing with irate customers makes you want to drive home, jump back into bed, and hide under the covers ... take heart. Once you know the tricks of the trade, angry customers become less upsetting and more acceptable as part of the customer service landscape. Here's how to diffuse overheated situations and win them over.

Listen First, Speak Later

■ The initial burst of anger from your customer will almost always be the most intense. And because it's so stressful for the person on the receiving end, flustered employees often try to end the confrontation quickly in order to ease their own discomfort.

This mistake usually leads to escalation. Resist the urge to interrupt, argue, or engage in problem solving. Instead, relax, slow down your breathing, and listen intently while nodding and making eye contact with your customer.

Apologize and Empathize

■ Your customer will eventually run out of steam and pause to collect his or her thoughts. When this happens, take the opportunity to apologize.

An effective apology goes to the heart of what has upset your customer. For example, a customer who is displeased about an undisclosed \$10 service charge is more likely to be angry about feeling deceived than about the fee itself. Address that anger specifically and empathize with it.

Example: "I'm sorry. That charge should have been pointed out to you at the time of your purchase. No one likes to be surprised by hidden fees."

Resist "blame shifting" or passing the buck. In your customer's eyes, you are the company, so don't take anything that's said to you personally. This is the secret to coping well with any customer service complaint.

Clarify

■ Immediately after apologizing, repeat the customer's complaint to him or her. Clarifying the complaint assures the customer that you're concerned about the problem and helps you avoid further misunderstandings that may reignite his or her anger again.

Maintain A Calm, Positive Tone

■ You have tremendous influence over your customer's emotional state. (Although it doesn't feel that way!) Lowering your voice and speaking slowly and calmly in a pleasant manner relaxes and disarms an angry customer.

Take Immediate Action

■ The longer they wait, the more they seethe. Make the unhappy customer your top priority. You want him or her to see you as an advocate, not an opponent. Start by asking what resolution is desired, and begin working toward a solution.

If you can't find an immediate answer or solution, take the lead in phoning the customer back. Jot down contact information and outline the corrective steps you will be taking. Include the names of everyone who will be involved in the solution.

Example: "I'm going to send this purchase order to Sarah, our inventory manager. She'll order the correct part for you. It should be here on Tuesday. She'll call you at the number you provided. If you have any problems, please contact me immediately and I'll help you resolve it. Here is my card."

One of the biggest drivers of customer anger is feeling like they're getting the runaround. Taking the steps above assures your customer of the following facts:

- He or she is valued.
- You have a plan.
- He or she won't be abandoned.
- You will be accountable and available for follow-up.

Follow Up "Tough Cases"

■ An angry customer is not necessarily a former customer. So, don't write them off!

A follow-up phone call or message a few days following the resolution of a complaint sends the message that you care about your customer's satisfaction and well-being. Most customers just want to feel valued. This technique builds super strong loyalty.

You can't please everyone, but you can improve and enhance your company's image and responsiveness in every dispute. The more you practice these techniques, the more success you'll have calming customers, winning them over, and reducing stress.

What the EAP Can Do

No one is superhuman. An unusually stressful incident involving an angry customer can leave you rattled. If a violent or near-violent incident took place, you certainly may benefit from support, even if it is just talking about it. If a stressful incident leaves you lacking energy or a positive attitude, contact your employee assistance program for practical tips and targeted help.