

Overview - Customer Service and Angry Customers

Could You Explain "Bait" In Terms of The Angry Customer?

We've said that the major purpose or goal of the attacker is to control your emotional reactions and behavior. The attacker wants to take and hold the initiative, and force you to react and respond to him, rather than the other way around. As long as the attacker can maintain this conversational control, the unpleasant interaction will continue. This isn't good because while you focus on reacting and responding, you won't be able to help the customer, or find a way to end the interaction in a positive way.

The primary way the attacker uses to maintain control involves "bait". Bait consists of behaviors (verbal and non-verbal) designed to get you to react, usually in an emotional way. If you respond to the bait, you hand over control of the conversation to the attacker, which is exactly what he/she wants. The bait is used to upset you enough so you will be off balance emotionally. Take a look at the dialogue below:

Customer: "What the hell is wrong with you. Every time I come here to try to resolve this, you hassle me and give me the runaround. If you had a clue about your job, this wouldn't happen. And this is the last time you are going to do this to me".

Employee: "How dare you talk to me like that. I do my best to help and you don't even see that we're short-staffed..." Customer: "I can talk to you any way I want. I pay your salary! You work for me! ?

Look carefully at the customer's first statements. Has the person said anything that is NOT blaming, demeaning, threatening, or otherwise emotionally provocative? No. It's ALL bait. The ONLY message embedded in that mess of insulting words is "I'm angry". That's it. The words are bait.

Look at how the employee responds. He "takes the bait", and loses any control over the direction of the conversation. He responds aggressively ("How dare you talk to me like that"), and then defensively. The most important thing here is that the employee takes the bait, responds to the attacking remarks and ends up being controlled.

In turn, the customer replies with additional bait. This is not heading in a constructive direction, particularly if the employee allows himself to be lead by the nose into acting badly himself.

This is typical of situations where an employee takes the bait. The employee's reaction sends a few "sub-messages" to the customer. First, the customer knows he has found gaps in the employee's armor, and knows (largely unconsciously) that he can maintain control if he continues to bait and act aggressively and in an insulting way.

Second, the customer knows he can upset the employee. The upshot is that the attacks will probably continue, since the customer is getting what he wants psychologically – control over the employee and the interactions. He's being rewarded for bad behavior. Let's take a look at the dialogue shown on the next page, where the employee does NOT reward the bad behavior.

Notice the difference? The employee doesn't take the bait dangled by the customer, and works to reassert control over the interaction. He does this by acknowledging the person's anger, and

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NOT exploring any of the baiting remarks. At the end of this short dialogue, the customer begins to respond to the employee, and work with him. This conversation is much more likely to be shorter, more productive, and less upsetting than the one where the employee swallows the bait.

The key point is that the attacker expects you to take the bait. It's in the rules of the hostility game.

The psychological rule used by the customer goes like this:

“If I use bait, the other person will react to it in ways that will allow me to maintain control”.

So, you want to break this rule of the game. After all, why should you play a game defined by the attacker, which you will lose? You need to set up a new game, with a different set of rules, and the first step is not to play by the attacker's rules, on the attacker's turf.

Don't take bait. Recognize it for what it is, an attempt by the other person to control and irritate you. Later on we'll talk about specific responses you can make that take you out of the hostile game. For now, remember that bait hides a nasty barbed hook. Stay away from it.

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