

Communicating With Customers

Should I Ever Hang Up On A Customer?

This is a common question, particularly from people working in call centers. First, hanging up on a customer implies that you simply put the phone down, with no warning or explanation. That's a bad idea, particularly because the customer is usually going to phone back anyway.

Unilateral Termination Of A Customer Service Phone Call

Rather than talking about "hanging up", in my books and seminars we talk about "terminating the conversation", because it's a bit different than hanging up. It's used when the customer is abusive, OR, when the conversation is clearly "stuck" and not likely to get better.

Here's the section from [Perfect Phrases for Customer Service, Second Edition \(Perfect Phrases Series\)](#) There are enhanced explanations in [If It Wasn't For The Customers I'd Really Like This Job: Stop Angry, Hostile Customers COLD While Remaining Professional, Stress Free, Efficient and Cool As A Cucumber.](#)

THE SITUATION - The Abusive Customer On The Phone

In Item 17 you saw how setting limits can encourage a customer to stop negative behavior. What happens if it doesn't work? In this example, we'll illustrate how to complete the limit-setting and limit-enforcing process.

We extend the dialogue from the previous item where we saw how powerful the limit-setting process is when it works. This is what happens when it doesn't.

Techniques Used To Deal With The Abusive Caller

1. Empathy Statements (1)
2. Set Limits (2)
3. Offer Choices/Empowering (3)

Example Dialogue Between Customer Service Rep And Abusive Customer

In this dialogue, the employee informs a customer of some behavior limits and the customer immediately steps past those limits.

Customer: *What are you, a [blanking] idiot? I'm fed up with you people, and I'm fed up with you. You don't seem to know your [blank] from a hole in the ground.*

Employee: *Sir, I understand you're upset (1), but if you continue to yell and swear, I'll have to end the conversation. (2). It's up to you whether you would like to continue (3).*

Customer: *I'd like you to get my damned check. Is that too much to ask, you stupid [bleep]?*

Employee: *I'm going to end this call. You are welcome to call back at some other time (2).*

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Customer: [Continues to swear.]

Employee: [Gently hangs up the phone.]

EXPLANATIONS

This dialogue is identical to the one in Item 17 until the point where the customer ignores the limits and continues to swear and yell. The employee realizes that the customer is unlikely to become less obnoxious right now.

She can do little to help the customer until he stops the offending behavior and she's no longer a human pincushion. Having decided to end the call, she indicates her intention (2) and then says, "**You are welcome to call back.**" She adds the latter invitation because she doesn't want to refuse service to the customer or be accused of hanging up.

It's generally not acceptable to hang up without a word. Hanging up without notice is more likely to

encourage the customer to call back, even angrier than before.

You can use the enforcing limits technique in a delayed fashion. Sometimes a customer agrees to abide

by the limits you set, behaves well for a minute or two, and then loses his or her temper and escalates into bad

behavior. In that situation, you can repeat ("Broken Record") the limit or begin the process of termination.

HINTS

- Don't view hanging up or enforcing limits as punishment. You aren't getting back at the customer or getting even. All you're doing is trying to get control of the situation and encourage the person to stop the bad behavior so you can help.
- Again, use a calm, matter-of-fact tone of voice.
- Make sure you understand your organization's policy about ending unpleasant customer interactions. Companies vary in terms of what they want employees to do in these situations.
- Once you set a limit and indicate you're enforcing it (ending the conversation), the only thing that should
- keep you on the phone is a sincere, almost desperate apology. Ignore any grudging apologies and continue to end the conversation.
- Don't set limits you aren't prepared and able to enforce. If you do, you lose all control and credibility.
- Don't set limits and decide not to enforce them when required. Same reason as above.

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