

Communicating With Customers

Can you explain assertiveness, vs aggressiveness and passiveness with angry customers?

From Principle #6 in [If It Wasn't For The Customers I'd Really Like This Job](#)

Be assertive, not aggressive or passive.

Being assertive means that you act in a confident way, and that you talk calmly but firmly, if necessary. It also means that your physical posture must be confident rather than too passive or aggressive.

If you have taken an assertiveness training course, you will doubtless be familiar with assertive language such as:

- *"When you yell at me, I feel upset. I would like you to stop yelling, or I am going to end our conversation."*
- *"When you get too close to me, I feel trapped. I would like you to step back, or I am going to ask you to leave."*

We DO NOT suggest you use this type of language with angry clients. It is fine with people with whom you have relationships, but remember that the angry client isn't particularly interested in your feelings.

They are concerned about their own feelings, and want to hear you recognize them rather than vice versa. Leave out references to your own emotions, unless you are interacting with a customer you might have known for a long time. If the person is someone you believe does care about your feelings, then it makes sense to mention them. Remember most customers, at least when angry, simply don't care if you are offended.

Being assertive means being firm, sounding and looking confident, and recognizing that, you too, have rights.

Now, let's look at aggressiveness and passivity. Most of us know how to be aggressive. The aggressive person uses very harsh language, a tone of voice that sounds angry, and projects a physically confrontational stance. Note that we include any expressions of frustration in this category of behavior, such as sighing, rolling the eyes, etc. That's aggressive too.

The problem with aggressive behavior is that it invites confrontation and argument. If you want to spend half an hour arguing over some off topic point, or if you want to put yourself at risk physically, then be aggressive. If, however, you want to deal with the client professionally and quickly, and increase your own safety, then be firm, assertive and calm.

At the other end of the spectrum is passivity. Passive people tend not to stand up for themselves, use a tone of voice that is whiny or weak sounding, and tend to use a body posture that looks powerless. Some people believe that the more passive you are the less likely people are to be nasty to you. The problem with this is that passivity will entice a bully to redouble their efforts at intimidation. They will sense your discomfort, and continue to attack if they feel you are

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off balance or weak.

Again, assertiveness is the key. Firm but cooperative language and tone is the best choice and avoids creating confrontations, or appearing like you have a “kick me” sign on your butt.

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