

What Should I Do When A Customer...

What To Do If You Will Be Late For A Meeting With A Customer

It happens. You have an appointment with a customer, but get stuck in traffic or are otherwise delayed. If you mishandle the situation you may end up losing a customer, prospective customer, or sale. Here's how to handle it.

THE SITUATION WHEN YOU ARE LATE FOR A CUSTOMER MEETING

Being late for an appointment or meeting with a customer is not a good thing. Sometimes delays are unavoidable due to circumstances beyond your control or because you need to do something for the benefit of the customer. Here are some tips on how to handle situations when you know you'll be late or actually arrive late.

TECHNIQUES USED TO DEFUSE A POTENTIAL PROBLEM CUSTOMER

- | Apologize (1)
- | Explain Reasoning or Actions (2)
- | Empathy Statements (3)
- | Offering Choices/Empowering (4)
- | Provide Alternatives (5)
- | Thank-Yous (6)

DIALOGUE EXAMPLE

The employee realizes he's going to be at least 10 minutes late for a meeting with his customer because there was a delay in printing material needed for the meeting. The employee contacts the customer by phone.

Employee: *Mr. Jones, I'm really sorry (1). It looks like I'm going to be about 10 minutes late to arrive because there's been a delay in printing out the contracts we need to look at during the meeting (2). I'm printing them out now and shouldn't be later than 3 P.M. (2).*

Customer: *Well, I've got the VP of finance coming, and I can't have him sitting around waiting. I have to tell you I'm not impressed.*

Employee: *I can understand you are disappointed (3). I had to decide whether to delay coming over until the contracts were done or to come on time without the contracts (2). If you want to reschedule or if there's any other way to make this more convenient, I'm flexible (4).*

Customer: *No, that's fine.*

Employee: *If you want to go over the other reports while you're waiting, maybe we can shorten the meeting so we can still end at the appointed time (5).*

Customer: *That's a good idea.*

When the employee finally arrives, this is what he says.

Employee: *I have to apologize to all of you (1), and especially to Mr. Smith [VP of finance], for being late, and thank you for your patience (6). [He then explains the reason for arriving late (2).]*

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EXPLANATIONS

Most of the techniques used in this example are straightforward.

The use of apologies (1), thank-yous (6), and empathy statements (3) needs no further explanation.

Here's what's important. Even though the delay is "only" 10 minutes, the employee notifies the customer of the delay and provides an explanation of why he will be late (2). Notification, even when you'll only be a few

minutes late, is always a good thing, because it demonstrates your concern for the customer and his or her time.

With the advent of the cell phone, it's easy to contact customers even if you're in transit (but be sure to follow driving/cell phone laws).

If you look at (4), you'll see the use of offering a choice to the customer. He offers an "out" so that if the customer needs to reschedule or cancel the meeting, he can do so using the opening the employee provides.

This is an excerpt from [Perfect Phrases For Customer Service, a low cost book published by McGraw-Hill that contains dozens and dozens of real life situations that occur for customer service representatives, and how to solve them professionally.](#)

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