

What Should I Do When A Customer...

What to do when a customer bad-mouths my employer

You may come across a situation where your customer comes in with a “chip on his shoulder” because he believes he has been treated badly in the past or has heard from others that your organization doesn’t treat people well. This tends to happen more often in government and public sector environments (for example, schools) because, unlike in the private sector, the customer cannot simply go somewhere else. The person needs to deal with the specific organization, and the organization needs to provide service. How do you deal with the customer with negative preconceptions, whether justified or not?

TECHNIQUES USED

- ? Active Listening (1)
- ? Not Taking the Bait (2)
- ? Some People Think That (Neutral Mode) (3)
- ? Assurances of Effort (4)
- ? Refocus (5)

DIALOGUE - When A Customer Criticizes Your Company

This situation occurs in a government office. The customer can’t choose to take his business elsewhere and clearly has some negative preconceptions.

Customer: OK. I need to get these building permits done, and I don’t want you guys to jerk me around like you

usually do or run me through reams of red tape. I don’t have the time.

Employee: It sounds to me like you want to get these permits done as quickly as possible, right (1, 2)?

Customer: Damn right. You know, nobody likes dealing with you guys. It’s always a major hassle, and you screw it up half the time.

Employee: Some people get impatient with the process (3). Let’s see if I can surprise you (4). Since you want to get this done fast, let’s get to it (5). I know you’ve done this before, so you probably have the information you need for the permits (5).

Why It Works

Before we go through the specifics, what attitude is the employee demonstrating? Is it defensive? Or is the employee seeing this situation as a challenge she can win, turning around the negative attitude? Clearly, it’s the latter.

It’s important not to be defensive, argue, or react in negative ways.

Take a look at the first employee response. The employee wants to show concern, demonstrate she has heard the customer’s comments, but not encourage the customer to rant and rave

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about the government organization.

She does this by using a listening response (1) and by not taking the bait (2). She doesn't waste time arguing with the customer to get him to change his mind about the government. The employee continues to acknowledge the concerns without encouraging in-depth focusing on his negative impressions by using a technique called "Neutral Mode" ("Some People Think That") (3). This shows that she is paying attention, without encouraging argument. In (4) she indicates that she'll try to offer a better experience (assurances of effort). Then in (5) she makes the important transition away from the negative feelings to address the reason the customer has come in—the permits. That's refocusing.

HINTS

As with all situations in which the customer is angry or prepared to be angry, it's important to acknowledge (show you hear and understand) "where the customer is coming from," without necessarily agreeing or disagreeing.

However, you don't want to spend more time than is necessary on the feelings or the past.

Acknowledge and then refocus on the task at hand.

Apart from refocusing from anger and emotions back to the task at hand, also refocus or move the conversation

from what's happened in the past to what's in front of the both of you—the here and now. Since customers usually

want something now, it's to their benefit to stop focusing on the bad things they think have been done to them in

the past and focus on getting things done in the present.

That makes it easy to make the case for talking about the present and what you can do now for the customer.

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