



78 Dealing positively with complaints

What is a complaint?

A complaint is an expression of customer dissatisfaction. It can be easy to drive customers away if their complaints are ignored or handled badly. A complaint is a statement about expectations that have not been met. A complaint can be a gift if you choose to see it that way.

Why is getting complaints important?

Your clients and customers have two options when they feel dissatisfied. They can talk or they can just walk away. If they just walk away you have no opportunity to solve the problem, you don't even know what it is. Many people don't complain even though they are unhappy with something. Their reasons can include not wanting to bother anyone or cause a fuss, risking confrontation, or they simply don't know how to. They will probably only express their complaint to other people, one in five people tell up to 20 others. One complaint can turn into negative marketing very quickly.

If you get told about a complaint, it gives you the opportunity to learn about your business, to keep the customer who has complained and ensure that the feedback they give others afterwards about you is positive. If your customers have the courage to complain, it gives you the chance to apologise and put it right. Some customer relationships can be stronger as a result of a complaint being handled well. You can show your customers how much you care about giving them the service they deserve.

Complaints can be one of the best forms of feedback. They can tell you how to improve your product and service. This constant improvement is vital to any business that wants to maintain and grow its market share.

Your challenge

Your challenge will be to create an atmosphere within your business that encourages customers to complain if they feel that their expectations have not been met. You will need a system for handling them that can immediately deliver the feel-good factor. You and your team will need to listen and put your values into practice – delivering exactly what you promise. In the face of a complaint you and

your team will need to remind yourselves of the life-time value of a good customer. Your team will need to be coached in complaint handling and given the authority to provide answers and solutions as quickly as possible. Complaints must be learnt from and the appropriate changes made which prevent them from recurring. Your aim needs to be ultimately to reduce the number of complaints that you get.

How to deal positively with complaints

- Listen, understand exactly what the customer is dissatisfied with and apologise.
- Offer a solution that gives the customer more than they expect and put a smile on their face.

Examples

If a customer enjoying a meal in a restaurant complains about the main course, offer them a replacement and a free bottle of wine to compensate for their disappointment. If a customer complains about the late delivery of a package they have ordered, thank them for their feedback, do not charge for the delivery and offer free delivery on their next order with you. These are the little extras that make people smile with surprise and are the things that they are more likely to share with others, forgetting the complaint ever happened in the first place.

Write the customer a letter of apology or, better still, as director of the company give them a personal call. There was a story recently about a customer who complained about a problem with a flight he booked through Virgin Atlantic. He got a shock when Richard Branson himself called apologising for the problems and asked the question ‘What could we do for you that would ensure you continue to feel good about us?’ The result was a first class upgrade with a free place for a guest. The customer’s day had suddenly improved dramatically.

Let the customer express any negative emotions they might have connected with the complaint without taking it personally. Remember they are complaining about the service not about you. Ask questions to clarify your understanding of the problem and take notes. When the customer feels heard, you will be able to express your appreciation of their feelings and apologise.

Here are some words that will help ensure that the customer feels that his or her frustrations are understood.

‘I appreciate that this must have been very frustrating for you. We apologise for the inconvenience that it has caused you. We would like the opportunity to put this right for you immediately.’

Give your customer a choice of solutions. This will give the customer a feeling of being back in control, which is often what they feel has been lost when something goes wrong with their order.

Make sure you and your team keep a complaints log. This complaints log should include: date, customer details, complaint details, cause, solution provided, and – most importantly – system changes to ensure the complaint does not recur.

YOUR COMPLAINT HANDLING – SPECIAL RESPONSE CHECKLIST

- ▶ How does your business handle complaints?
- ▶ What kind of complaints do you tend to get?
- ▶ Are there any themes or patterns?
- ▶ What have you learnt about how to improve your product or service from the complaints you have had?
- ▶ How could you make it easier for customers to express their dissatisfaction if they feel it?
- ▶ How do you record customer complaint information?

How to use this information

Every business from time to time will experience customer dissatisfaction. Nobody is perfect. Mistakes happen. If you and your team see the complaints you get as gifts, do everything possible to learn from them, maintain a positive relationship with the customers who talk, you can only go forward.

Think about a complaint as a gift of learning