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# HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

Gary Case  
Patrice Rhoades-Baum



**HDI**

Leading IT Service & Support



# **HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS**

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# Table of Contents

<b>About the Authors</b> .....	7
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## **Chapter 1**

<b>Good Customer Service: The Starting Point for Handling Difficult Customers</b> .....	9
Provide Service as Well as Solutions .....	10
The Call Flow Process .....	11

## **Chapter 2**

<b>How to Handle Angry and Irate Customers</b> .....	19
The Call Flow Process .....	19

## **Chapter 3**

<b>How to Handle Customers with Unrealistic Expectations</b> .....	25
Types of Unrealistic Customers .....	25
The Call Flow Process .....	26

## **Chapter 4**

<b>How to Handle Customers Who Ramble</b> .....	31
The Call Flow Process .....	31

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1-1 The seven steps in the typical call flow process .....	12
Figure 1-2 Steps for greeting your customers .....	13
Figure 1-3 Effective listening techniques .....	14
Figure 1-4 Six steps for concluding customer calls .....	18
Figure 2-1 The call flow process for handling angry or irate customers .....	20
Figure 3-1 The call flow process for handling customers with unrealistic expectations .....	27
Figure 4-1 The call flow process for handling customers who ramble .....	32



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# About the Authors

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As senior trainer at Help Desk Institute, Gary Case brings the experience and achievements of his 21 years in customer support management and training to HDI. Gary spent 17 years in the financial industry where he managed branch operations and training. During that time, he taught at the Institute of Financial Education and received a Teacher of the Year award. Since 1990, Gary has worked with HDI as a course developer, trainer developer, and trainer. He has taught courses on customer service skills, problem-solving skills, supervisory skills, and communication skills throughout the United States and in Africa, Australia, Europe, and the Middle East. An in-demand speaker, Gary has spoken at a host of national and international conferences, including HDI's annual International Help Desk Conference. His training credo is encouraging participants to become actively involved in their training to allow self-learning to take place.

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As associate editor at Help Desk Institute, Patrice Rhoades-Baum contributes her writing and editing skills to many of HDI's publications, including *LifeRaft*, HDI's professional journal; the annual *Help Desk Salary Survey*, the annual *Help Desk and Customer Support Practices Report*; and the annual *Help Desk Buyer's Guide*. Prior to joining HDI, Patrice owned her own writing and editing business. Her articles have been circulated nationally and internationally and cover a variety of topics including travel and tourism, the visual arts, and business.



# Chapter 1

## *Good Customer Service: The Starting Point for Handling Difficult Customers*

In an ideal world, every customer would be pleasant to work with, stay cool under pressure, and actually provide information that can help you do your job better. Unfortunately, many of our customers sometimes have bad days, need to meet difficult deadlines, or encounter frustrating technical problems. Fortunately for your customers, you are in a position to help them solve their immediate problems. However, providing solutions or information to difficult customers can be one of the most demanding, stressful components of your job. But it doesn't have to be.

Providing world-class customer service hinges on providing great customer service to everyone who contacts your help desk or support center for problem resolution or information. In short, you need to provide consistently great customer service to *all* your customers, including those who are angry, have unrealistic expectations, or ramble; and this booklet can help you do that.

In this chapter, you'll learn the importance of providing *service* as well as *solutions* to your customers. This chapter also sets forth the call flow process for resolving typical problems at the support center. As you'll see in subsequent chapters, this call flow process presents a foundation for dealing with difficult customers.

## HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

Chapter 2 presents specific techniques for handling angry and irate customers. Chapter 3 discusses how to transform customers' unrealistic expectations into realistic ones. And Chapter 4 describes how to curb ramblers to quickly and efficiently help them resolve their problems or give them the information they request.

### **Provide Service as Well as Solutions**

We don't have to tell you that your job is very demanding. As a customer support professional, your job requires strong communication skills, strong technical skills, and strong customer service skills.

And providing good customer service involves a key you may already realize: You need to be able to work with your customers before you can work on resolving their problems. To effectively work with your customers, you need to provide service in addition to providing solutions.

Often, we're good at providing solutions: We answer questions, solve problems, and provide information. But we sometimes miss the opportunity to provide quality service. Key to providing service is understanding and meeting customers' two basic needs: their need for assistance and their psychological needs. While we're pretty good at addressing customers' need for assistance (and then marching directly into providing solutions), we can forget to meet their psychological needs.

Working at a help desk or support center means you may not be able to meet their need for assistance 100 percent of the time. After all, most help desks won't be able to solve every customer's problem every time. But to provide service, you must meet customers' psychological needs 100 percent of the time. So you need to do both. Think about it this way: Meeting customers' psychological needs comes from the heart, and fixing problems comes from the head.

Meeting customers' psychological needs involves addressing their pertinent emotional issues before you can resolve their technical support problems. Customers typically need reassurance and feedback. And they want their problem to be the most important problem to you, because it's the most important one to them. In the following pages, we'll give you specific techniques for meeting customers' psychological needs.

Also, make sure you have the willingness to serve your customers. That's where you get the heart, and that's how you meet customers' psychological needs.

Finally, if you do not meet customers' basic needs, you end up with dissatisfied customers. It's important to note that 96 percent of dissatisfied customers will not complain—they will quit using your service. In addition, dissatisfied customers typically tell 10 to 20 people about their negative experiences. (Sometimes they tell as many people as they can!) On the other hand, satisfied customers tell only an average of five customers about their positive experiences. And if you solve dissatisfied customers' problems quickly, 95 percent will return, and they'll become positive supporters of your organization.

### **The Call Flow Process**

As we discussed in the above paragraphs, you need to meet your customers' psychological needs in addition to providing assistance. In this section, we present a call flow process to help you guide your customers to problem resolution. Throughout the process, you're providing great customer service and meeting their psychological needs.

Figure 1-1 presents the seven steps of the typical call flow process. These steps are: greet the customer, listen, determine their needs, respond to their needs, get agreement, conclude the call, and follow up as necessary. Note that this process presents these actions in terms of working with customers over the phone.

## HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

Know that you can apply these steps to any service resolution situation with your customers, whether you receive service requests by e-mail, by fax, or during face-to-face discussions.

The following paragraphs describe the call flow process. As you learn this process, keep in mind that it forms the foundation for working with difficult customers, which we'll discuss in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

1. Greet the customer
2. Listen
3. Determine their needs
4. Respond to their needs
5. Get agreement
6. Conclude the call
7. Follow up as necessary

*Figure 1-1 The seven steps in the typical call flow process*

### **Greet the Customer**

The first step in the call flow process is properly greeting your customer. Remember, your initial contact with your customer is a moment of truth. Start out on a positive note—those first few seconds set the tone for your entire conversation.

As Figure 1-2 shows, the techniques for greeting customers include: answering by the third ring, speaking clearly, giving them your undivided attention, identifying yourself and your department, smiling, offering help, and noting their name.

Be sure to concentrate on your tone of voice. Since we lose all non-verbal communication over the phone, tone of voice becomes an important factor in the communication process. Keep in mind that customers can read as much into *how* we say something as *what* we say.

## Listen

Have you ever found yourself thinking about how to resolve a customer's problem while he or she is still describing the problem to you? This is an easy trap to fall into, since we think four times faster than we speak. Instead of thinking ahead, you need to actively listen. Concentrate on what your customers are saying to you. And always start listening from the beginning of the conversation. And don't assume you know what the question or problem is before the conversation is underway.

1. Answer by third ring
2. Speak clearly
3. Give them your undivided attention
4. Identify yourself and your department
5. Smile
6. Offer help
7. Note their name

*Figure 1-2 Steps for greeting your customers*

Effective listening isn't easy, and it doesn't come naturally to most of us. Listening is critical to the communication process and an important skill to learn. One way to hone this skill is to practice listening twice as much as you talk.

Figure 1-3 presents 10 techniques for effective listening. The first technique is to listen for the central idea and to concentrate on what they are saying to you. Next, listen between the lines. This means you need to differentiate between what they are saying and what they are actually doing. For example, a customer may call because his or her computer system continues to lock up. That may be the purpose of the call, but you can hear your customer typing in the background. You'll need to ask questions to find out the computer's current status.

Be sure to control your emotions. When our emotions get involved, our listening skills dramatically decrease. Next, try to ignore

## HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

disruptions or uncomfortable surroundings such as noise, lighting, or being too hot or too cold. Also, try not to have a “wandering ear.” At help desks, it’s easy to catch a phrase from another support person that may pique your curiosity or sound like a tidbit of information you could use. Even so, be sure to concentrate on listening to your customer.

1. Listen for the central idea
2. Listen between the lines
3. Control your emotions
4. Ignore disruptions or uncomfortable surroundings
5. Don’t latch on to key words
6. Ask questions
7. Repeat or paraphrase the message
8. Respond with short messages
9. Visualize the problem or situation
10. Don’t tune out

### *Figure 1-3 Effective listening techniques*

Beware of latching on to key words—you can miss hearing customers’ entire messages. (One exception is working with customers who ramble; we’ll discuss handling these difficult customers in Chapter 4.)

As in any communication situation, if you’re unclear about what is being said to you, ask questions to get the information you need. Another active listening technique is repeating or paraphrasing key concepts or messages your customers are communicating to you.

Also, we don’t have the benefit of non-verbal communication messages such as eye contact, facial expressions, and arm movements when we’re on the phone. So it’s helpful to interject short messages such as “yes,” “I understand,” and “all right.” These verbal signals tell your customers you’re listening. (As we’ll discuss in Chapter 3, do not use this technique with irate customers.)

Another listening technique is visualizing what the customers are describing. By drawing a picture of the printer and computer setup or imagining the scenario being described, you may more quickly grasp your customers' key points.

Finally, don't tune out. Keep the communication process open at all times. Remember, as call volumes and call complexity increase at the support center, the amount of time for handling service requests decreases. Active listening can help you get the information you need to do your job more quickly and efficiently, and it can help ensure your customers are happy with your services.

### **Determine Customers' Needs**

Next in the call flow process is determining customers' needs. At this step, you'll paraphrase what they've communicated to you, ask questions, and get feedback.

You can control the quality and quantity of information you receive to determine customers' needs by asking open-ended or close-ended questions. Open-ended questions typically begin with the words *how*, *why*, *when*, *who*, *what*, and *where*; this type of question provides an opportunity for customers to expound. Close-ended questions are typically yes/no questions and limit the information you'll receive.

Open-ended questions offer a better chance to uncover meaningful information and may reveal unexpected but vital information to resolve the service request. For example, asking, "What is the condition of your computer system?" may reveal a vital clue to the situation. Whereas, "Is your computer on?" may not prompt your customer to tell you about the black smoke streaming out of the hard drive!

Note that both question styles are useful tools at the help desk and support center. For example, asking close-ended questions can provide specific information, help you check for verification, and help you limit the range of the conversation as necessary.

## HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

Realize, though/that we typically ask significantly more close-ended questions than open-ended questions, so we limit our customers' responses and the information they can give us. Knowing how and when to use these two types of questions is a helpful skill for customer support professionals. By asking the appropriate questions, you can extract the necessary information to understand your customers' needs, then take the necessary steps to respond to their needs.

### **Respond to Customers' Needs**

This stage of the call flow process involves two steps: provide an empathy statement, then develop an action plan to resolve the problem.

Providing an empathy statement is simply telling customers you understand how they feel about their situation. Note that we're not suggesting you show sympathy. When you become sympathetic, your emotions can become involved. And, as we mentioned earlier, once your emotions become involved, it's difficult to objectively resolve problems. So it's better to say, "I can understand you're angry that you can't get your report printed," than, "I can understand you're angry, and I sure would be angry, too."

Next, propose a plan of action. Inform customers of the steps you plan to take, explain any steps they should take, tell them the benefits of your actions, and indicate the timeframe of the results, especially if you need to elevate the service request to the next level of support. Finally, check to ensure your customers understand the proposed solutions.

### **Get Agreement**

The next step in the call flow process is getting agreement with your customers. Asking questions such as "What do you think about this solution?" and "Why don't we try this remedy?" are forms of getting agreement. You want your customers to say, "Yes, let's try that" and agree with your plan of action.

Getting agreement is an important step in the call flow process, because customers are the only ones who can tell us if they're satisfied. You're proposing and developing your plan jointly, and you're responding to their psychological needs and their need for assistance. If we create a plan and impose it on them, they may not like it. And even if the plan works and their service request is resolved, they may not feel they received good customer service. In short, getting agreement is the step that invites your customers to take ownership of the solutions.

### **Conclude the Call**

Ending a telephone call can seem to be a simple matter. Yet, when it comes to customer satisfaction, you need to place as much emphasis on concluding the telephone call as you do on your initial greeting.

Figure 1-4 shows the six steps for closing the call with a customer: continue your positive attitude, use their names (this meets their psychological needs), review your plans of action (be sure to mention time elements and actions you'll take), and offer further assistance. When offering assistance, be sure to invite your customers to call the help desk or support center; don't set the expectation that you will be the one to always help them. Finally, thank your customers for calling, and be sure they are finished. In fact, you may want to ask if they have any other questions, then let them hang up first.

### **Follow Up as Necessary**

While it's virtually impossible and even counterproductive to follow up every service request, it does make sense to conduct follow-up calls for service requests that meet certain conditions. You may want to follow up with angry customers (we'll discuss this further in the next chapter); when the service request is a high priority or carries a specific deadline; when you're working on a service request that impacts a high number of users; or when the service request is assigned to a different group (as owner of

## HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

the request, you have the commitment to your customer to ensure the problems are resolved and your customer is satisfied).

1. Smile and have a positive, friendly attitude
2. Use customers' names
3. Review the plans of action
4. Offer further assistance
5. Thank them for calling
6. Be sure they are finished

***Figure 1-4 Six steps for concluding customer calls***

You might also want to follow up if you detect uneasiness on the part of your customer. Perhaps he or she is unsure about the resolution. Following up can help you build rapport with this customer. Finally, follow-up calls to first-time customers can help build rapport and can encourage them to continue to use your help desk or support center.

# Chapter 2

## *How to Handle Angry and Irate Customers*

It's bound to happen. The phone rings, and you quickly discover you have an angry (or worse yet, irate) customer on the line. Your heart pounds, your palms sweat, and your mind races. The conversation has just begun, and you're already stressed out. On top of all that, you're expected to provide great service to this customer.

Don't worry, you can do it. Now that you're familiar with the call flow process we discussed in Chapter 1, you can apply many of those techniques—and some new ones—to handle angry and irate customers. Figure 2-1 presents the 11 steps of the call flow process for handling angry or irate customers, and the following paragraphs in this chapter present the process in detail.

### **The Call Flow Process**

Keep in mind that all the steps in this call flow process are meant to defuse the customer. After a few minutes of conversation based on these techniques, your customer should be calm and rational. Again, each step is designed to calm the customer and defuse the situation.

## HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

1. Prepare yourself
2. Let them vent their anger
3. Listen
4. Verify for understanding
5. Empathize with these customers
6. Ask what they would like done to solve the problem
7. Get agreement
8. Apologize
9. Conclude the call
10. Follow up
11. Take care of yourself

*Figure 2-1 The call flow process for handling angry or irate customers*

### **Prepare Yourself**

The first step to take when dealing with an angry or irate customer is to prepare yourself. Sit up straight, make sure your posture is good, put a smile on your face, and take a deep breath.

In many cases, you'll have to prepare yourself while the customer is on the line. Of course, don't take that deep breath directly into the phone, but do take a deep breath, and do prepare yourself.

In some cases, you'll know you're about to work with an irate customer momentarily. Your office mate may field the call and toss you "that look" as he or she transfers the call to you. (You know "that look"; it communicates, "Boy, do I have a customer for you!") Before answering the call, take one or two seconds to prepare yourself. Then pick up the line and begin the call flow process we describe below.

### **Let Them Vent Their Anger**

The second step is letting angry and irate customers vent their anger. You need to allow these customers to vent from beginning to end. And don't interrupt. Unlike the typical call flow process we discussed earlier, don't use short messages with irate

customers. The odd thing about these customers is that they have a “tape recorder” in their heads. When they call, they’ve already prepared their speeches, they’ve been practicing, and you’re going to hear it—all of it. If you interrupt their speeches with short messages such as “I see” or “I understand,” angry or irate customers push stop on their “tape recorder,” hit rewind, go back to the beginning, and play the whole tape again. So you need to allow these customers to vent without any interruptions.

### **Listen**

The third step in dealing with angry or irate customers is listening. Use the same techniques we discussed in the last chapter. In addition, we recommend you take notes. Taking notes forces you to actively listen. Plus, you’ll be able to refer back to your notes later in your conversation.

### **Verify for Understanding**

The fourth step in handling angry or irate customers is verifying what they have communicated to you to ensure you understand the situation. Repeat their central messages to them—word for word. Do not paraphrase. What can happen if we paraphrase an angry or irate customer’s message, but we get it wrong? The customer just gets madder. He or she might pound a fist on the desk and declare, “That’s not what I said! You weren’t listening!” By repeating the problem word for word, the angry customer will agree with your statement, and you will be able to verify the problem for your understanding.

There are two advantages to verifying for understanding. The first is that you have a better opportunity to correctly identify the problem. Second, repeating the problem or situation in their own words means they will agree with your description, and they will agree with you because you will be correct. One of the keys to handling angry and irate customers is getting them to agree to anything as quickly as possible. This step is your first opportunity to get these customers to agree with you.

## HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

### **Empathize with Them**

In the previous chapter, we discussed how to respond to customers with empathy. Providing an empathy statement is a critical step in the call flow process when dealing with angry and irate customers. Remember, each of these steps is designed to defuse these difficult customers, and we're guiding these customers to a point where we can provide them with both service and solutions.

### **Ask What They Would Like Done to Solve the Problem**

Next in the call flow process for working with angry or irate customers, you'll want to determine what these customers need, respond to their needs, and get their input on the action plan.

As we discussed in Chapter 1, determine customers' needs by asking open-ended and close-ended questions. Ask enough questions to get all the information you need. And be sure not to paraphrase their responses—repeat the information word for word. Next, respond to their needs by developing a plan of action to resolve their problem. If they don't agree with the plan you propose, find out what they would like to see as a solution. At this point, you can determine if they are unrealistic as well as angry. If so, use the techniques we discuss in the next chapter. However, most customers are defused by this time in the conversation, and they'll be calm and realistic.

So ask these customers what they'd like to see for a solution. If they're still angry, their response might be, "Just fix it." Or their response could be unrealistic. (We'll talk about how to handle unrealistic customers in the next chapter.) But it's possible they have some suggestions you haven't thought of. In fact, you might come up with more than one plausible plan for resolution. Keep in mind that customers love alternatives, and giving them options (if you can) is a real treat for them.

Getting your customers involved in the resolution process means they'll be part owners of the solutions. When they help you determine the action plan, they're more apt to buy into the solution. In addition, it's difficult for them to come back to the help desk and claim you didn't do your job if they helped arrive at the solution. So ask these customers what they would like to see as a solution, and, together, determine a plan for resolution.

### **Get Agreement**

Next, you want to get agreement with angry or irate customers. You'll want to follow the same strategy for getting agreement that we set forth in Chapter 1.

Getting agreement is the step in which you and your customers jointly finalize the action plans you'll take to solve the problem. Remember, don't impose an action plan on customers. To achieve customer satisfaction, you need to give them the opportunity to verbally accept the action plan you propose. This step can be as brief and informal as asking, "Does this direction sound like the way to go?" And their reply: "Sounds good to me."

### **Apologize**

The next step in our call flow process for handling angry or irate customers is to apologize. Now, some customer support professionals may argue that there's no need to apologize if you didn't cause the problem. In addition, you may not feel comfortable making apologies to customers.

However, from a customer service standpoint, you have nothing to lose by apologizing and everything to gain—if you are sincere. Customers usually respond positively when you apologize. In fact, they may apologize to you for their behavior. This step in the call flow process can make a big difference when dealing with difficult customers—again, if you are sincere.

## HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

If you are unable to apologize using a sincere tone of voice, don't apologize. The wrong tone of voice will come across negatively, and your customer will know your apology is not sincere. A misstep here can completely destroy everything you've gained up to this point.

### **Conclude the Call, Follow Up, and Take Care of Yourself**

The next step is to conclude the call. Follow the same guidelines we discussed in Chapter 1 for the typical call flow process. When dealing with angry or irate customers, in particular, be sure they are completely finished before you hang up.

Next, as we discussed in Chapter 1, you may want to follow up with angry and irate customers. Even though you have defused the situation, solved the problem, and provided good customer service, you might consider making a follow-up call to these customers. You want them to remember their positive contacts with your help desk or support center, and a follow-up call can help achieve that.

Finally, take care of yourself. This is an extremely important step. Handling angry and irate customers can be very stressful, and you need to be sure you have a calm, positive attitude before taking your next call. This may mean taking a few minutes away from your desk for a quick break. Just be sure to take care of yourself, so you can provide solutions and service to your next customer.

# Chapter 3

## *How to Handle Customers with Unrealistic Expectations*

One of the wonderful things about being human is that we all share certain traits—both good and bad. In other words, most of us are able to relate to unrealistic customers, because most of us have been an unrealistic customer before (even though we don't like to admit it). Think of a time you had an unrealistic request or expectation. Were you demanding service from your mechanic? A refund from the grocery store? Money back, or at least an apology, from the dry cleaner that ruined your favorite sweater? How did the people providing service handle your request? Were they patient and helpful, or did they react to your emotional state and treat you rudely?

Unrealistic customers can create problems for customer support professionals, because they're demanding, forceful, and want something you may or may not be able to provide. To help you provide these customers with both service and solutions, we'll first take a look at the two types of unrealistic customers, then we'll discuss the call flow process for handling these customers.

### **Types of Unrealistic Customers**

The first type of unrealistic customer is the person who knows what he or she wants and is prepared to negotiate to get it. These customers start with an unreasonable request such as, "I need my hard drive replaced within 20 minutes." Your response is actually a negotiation and needs to be possible to accomplish, such as "Our field person can be there within the hour to investigate the problem, and we should have you up and running in a couple of hours." These unrealistic customers know they're negotiating

## HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

with you/and their next move usually meets you in the middle. Their response might be, “Try to have my computer running in two hours—that can still work for me.” In short, when customers make unrealistic demands, you have to manage those demands.

The second type of unrealistic customer is the person who doesn't know what to ask for. These customers tell you again and again how displeased or frustrated they are, but they don't actually ask you a question. You need to listen to their messages, determine what they want (it most likely will be unrealistic), then manage their demands.

Figure 3-1 presents the call flow process for handling customers with unrealistic expectations. This call flow process is: greet the customer, listen, determine if they are truly unrealistic, acknowledge their dissatisfaction, empathize with them, explain the consequences and risks of their requests, offer alternatives, get agreement, conclude the call, follow up as necessary, and take care of yourself.

Know, too, that if you are unable to meet these customers' requests and guide them through the entire call flow process, you can forward these customers to your supervisor. There's nothing wrong with this; supervisors typically have more authority and flexibility to meet certain requests than front-line support staff.

### **The Call Flow Process**

The first two steps for handling unrealistic customers—greet the customer and listen—follow the typical call process flow outlined in Chapter 1. During the listening step, be sure to repeat or paraphrase the message and ask open-ended and close-ended questions to fully understand your customers' predicaments.

## HOW TO HANDLE CUSTOMERS WITH UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

1. Greet the customer
2. Listen
3. Determine if the request is unrealistic
4. Acknowledge their dissatisfaction
5. Empathize with them
6. Explain the consequences and risks
7. Offer alternatives
8. Get agreement
9. Conclude the call
10. Follow up as necessary
11. Take care of yourself

*Figure 3-1 The call flow process for handling customers with unrealistic expectations*

The following paragraphs present specifics for handling these difficult customers, beginning with determining whether the customers' requests are truly unrealistic.

### **Determine if the Request is Unrealistic**

After listening to your customers and determining their key points, you must determine if their requests are truly unrealistic. If they aren't, go ahead and fulfill the request—if it's within your power and your authority to do so. The request may be a task or responsibility you usually don't perform. However, by taking care of their requests, you can ensure these customers don't transform into angry customers, and you'll probably save your supervisor from getting calls from them.

You might occasionally receive service requests that aren't within your realm of responsibility or authority, though you think they should be. Consider negotiating these areas of responsibility with your supervisor. Keep in mind that your help desk or support center exists to help your customers be as productive as possible, though you need to balance this with all the responsibilities of the support center.

## HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

Of course, you may determine that a customer's service request is completely unrealistic. In that case, follow this call flow process for handling customers with unrealistic requests.

### **Acknowledge Their Dissatisfaction**

The next step in this call flow process is acknowledging these customers' dissatisfaction. They want you to do something that you are unable to do. So in this step, repeat their requests and acknowledge their dissatisfaction. You might say, "I know you're frustrated" or "I understand you're angry."

We'd like to add a few words of caution: Even though you need to acknowledge a customer's emotional state, you cannot allow your emotions to get involved. If your emotions become involved, you won't objectively focus on the situation. Whenever you deal with difficult customers, keep in mind that they aren't frustrated with you, they are frustrated because of the situation. So you need to depersonalize your conversation with them. And remember, acknowledge their emotions while you listen for content.

### **Empathize with Them**

Providing an empathy statement works in all customer contact situations. Just as providing an empathy statement can calm angry and irate customers, this technique can also calm unrealistic customers.

As we discussed in Chapter 1, providing an empathy statement is simply telling customers you understand how they feel in their situation. For example, you might say, "I understand that you can't get your report printed and might miss your deadline."

The empathy statement is similar to acknowledging customers' dissatisfaction. When you acknowledge customers' dissatisfaction, you acknowledge their emotional state; whereas, the empathy statement acknowledges the situation. There's a fine line between these two steps in this call flow process. In fact, you can acknowledge

## HOW TO HANDLE CUSTOMERS WITH UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

customers' dissatisfaction and provide an empathy statement in the same sentence. For example, you might say, "I understand you're frustrated that the printer doesn't work and that it could jeopardize your deadline."

### **Explain the Consequences and Risks**

Customers with unrealistic expectations often don't realize they're being unrealistic. In this step of the call flow process, you explain the consequences or risks of what they want you to do. This easy step can radically change customers' perspectives, their behaviors, and their demands.

For example, a customer may call and pressure you to reboot the network to eradicate his or her network problems. Your response might be, "Well, if we do that, it would mean shutting down the 50 customers on that system." Your customer's response would probably be, "Oh, I didn't realize the impact." Suddenly, your unreasonable customer has become reasonable. Now, you can work on solving this customer's service request.

### **Offer Alternatives**

Next, offer a variety of solutions to solve customers' problems, if you can. Following the above example, you might offer these alternatives, "We can dispatch a field person within the hour to look at the situation, so we don't have to reboot the entire network. Or, we can plan to reboot the network after midnight, when it won't affect the other employees."

Offering alternatives is an important step for handling customers with unrealistic expectations, especially those who know what they want and are prepared to negotiate for it. This step helps them buy into the solution to the problem and helps you maneuver the discussion to a positive note.

Next, follow the typical call flow process described in Chapter 1 to get agreement on the plan, conclude the call, and follow up if

## HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

you feel it's necessary. Again, end the conversation on a positive note—customers will remember your positive attitude and forget how difficult they were at the beginning of the conversation!

Finally, take care of yourself. Whenever you handle unrealistic, angry, and irate customers, it's easy to take their comments personally. Often, these customers' statements and emotions are directed at you, and no matter how hard you try, you can end up accepting some of these emotions. So be sure to take a moment to regain your calm and positive attitude.

# Chapter 4

## *How to Handle Customers Who Ramble*

“Hi, how’s it going? I’m having some problems with my computer; but that reminds me, let me tell you about my trip...”

They’re easy to spot, but impossible to duck—they’re customers who ramble. They tell you about their spouse, their kids, their vacation, their boss, and the “monster” deadline for their current project. By the time they finish their monologue, they’ve forgotten why they called.

Ramblers just didn’t happen into the category of difficult customers—they talked their way in! In this chapter, we present specific techniques to handle these difficult customers.

Figure 4-1 presents the call flow process for handling customers who ramble. The 11 steps are: greet the customer, listen, acknowledge what they are talking about, ask open-ended questions, acknowledge them again, ask more open-ended questions, ask close-ended questions, get agreement, conclude the call, follow up as necessary, and take care of yourself.

### **The Call Flow Process**

The first step—greeting the customer—follows the typical call flow process we presented in Chapter 1. The following paragraphs present specifics for handling these difficult customers, beginning with listening.

## HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

1. Greet the customer
2. Listen
3. Acknowledge what they are talking about
4. Ask open-ended questions
5. Acknowledge them again
6. Ask more open-ended questions
7. Ask close-ended questions
8. Get agreement
9. Conclude the call
10. Follow up as necessary
11. Take care of yourself

*Figure 4-1 The call flow process for handling customers who ramble*

### **Listen**

The key to handling ramblers is attentive listening. Though it's tempting to not listen to everything these people say, ramblers will toss a few key words into the fray of their conversation. If you fail to listen to their entire conversation, it's likely that you'll miss the central message. Getting a handle on the message is key. Once you know the message, you can begin to manage the conversation to quickly provide service *and* solutions.

### **Acknowledge What They are Talking About**

Next, acknowledge the subject of the conversation—even if they're talking about how great their vacation was. You can say, "It sounds like you had a good time." Acknowledgment statements meet these customers' psychological needs and lets them know you're listening. Next, before ramblers have a chance to meander along another verbal path, move in and ask a series of open-ended and close-ended questions about their service request.

### **Ask Open- and Close-ended Questions**

At this step in the call flow process, you can take the reins of the conversation and steer ramblers toward problem resolution. Immediately after your acknowledgment statement, ask an open-ended question about the business at hand. You can start with,

## HOW TO HANDLE CUSTOMERS WHO RAMBLE

“How may we help you today?” Or, in the case of our just-home-from-vacation-rambler, we can say, “You mentioned something was wrong with your computer. What’s the problem?”

After these customers answer your question, they may not expand on the problem. They will start rambling again. We guarantee it. Our vacationing rambler might start talking about his or her plans for the next vacation; eventually, this customer will have to pause to take a breath. As soon as ramblers pause, acknowledge what they’re rambling about. Again, this meets their psychological needs.

Next, quickly move in with another open-ended question about their technical problem. Earlier, we discussed that ramblers typically toss key words into the conversation. Asking a second open-ended question is your opportunity to home in on the subject of the service request. For our vacationing rambler, you might ask, “Can you describe what you were doing when your system locked up?”

After gaining some insight from the second open-ended question, immediately follow up with a close-ended question. You might ask, “Did you try rebooting your computer?” Now you’ve gained control of the conversation. At this point, continue asking mostly close-ended questions to keep the rambler on track. Know, too, that there are some ramblers who will require a third acknowledgment and a third open-ended question before you can home in with your close-ended questions. In short, handling customers who ramble involves a combination of skills: acknowledging what they’re talking about to meet their psychological needs and asking a series of open-ended and close-ended questions. And key to handling all types of difficult customers is managing the conversation.

Finally, follow the typical call flow process described in Chapter 1 to get agreement on the plan of action you jointly determine and conclude the call. You can also follow up with ramblers if

## HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS

you feel it's necessary, realizing, of course, that you need to control ramblers during the follow-up calls.

Again, take care of yourself after you finish conversations with difficult customers. Much of what we stress in customer service is meeting customers' psychological needs. But who meets your psychological needs? You need to rely on your team for support and lend them support, so you can provide an energized, enthusiastic approach to customer service.





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