

## Dealing with Difficult Customers

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**T**he difficult customer. Don't they just make your blood boil!? In a recent research study, 65% of service employees listed “rude and impatient customers” among their top ten causes of work-related stress. Three particular types of customers were cited as being most difficult to deal with:

- **Never satisfied.** The customer who complains constantly, is harshly or tactlessly critical. Nothing is adequate, and they continuously verbalize negativity or dissatisfaction.
- **Always angry.** Moody, edgy, hostile, or aggressive, even when they're not upset about anything in particular.
- **Verbally Compulsive.** Overly talkative customers who want to "process" everything verbally, at length, even when it's obvious that there is work to be done and other customers to be served.

There is no doubt that working with these types of customers can be maddening at times. But in reality, most businesses and employees should learn to APPRECIATE these customers, because as difficult as they are, at least you know they're having problems. The vast majority of customers (the one's we love) never complain, even if they are dissatisfied. So there may be issues you never address because you don't know they exist.

Here are a few facts that may cause you to re-think your attitude toward difficult customers. Most of the time, when people have a complaint, they complain to everyone else rather than the organization or individuals who caused the complaint. A few years ago there was a study commissioned by the White House Office of Consumer Affairs. The group that performed the study, TARP, the Technical Assistance Research Program, found that in an average business, 96% of people who are dissatisfied DON'T complain directly. So for every 25 dissatisfied customers, you're only hearing from one. What do the other 24 do? They complain to their friends, family, neighbors, business acquaintances. Not

only do these passive dissatisfied customers never come back to you, but ultimately they cause many others to never do business with you in the first place.

So as frustrating as the difficult customer can be, it may help to think of them as the “Canary in the coal mine” to help you detect customer service challenges (rather than odorless gas) you may have been unaware of. And if anything, you want to encourage more customers to verbalize their dissatisfaction, not less.

How do you make certain you’re hearing from as many dissatisfied customers as possible? Well, you have to ask. It’s really that simple. Call them up or ask them in person. Actively solicit feedback to find out what they are thinking. No one is perfect. No organization is perfect. But all can strive for perfection by finding out where their imperfections might be. Ask the customer, and they will tell you. If you don't ask, you may never know.

So let’s assume that you DO ask, and discover that a customer has a complaint. Or you don’t have to ask because a “difficult” customer is letting you know loudly and clearly exactly what your problem is (are you loving them yet?). While there is no way to come up with a set of hard and fast rules for every situation, here are some general guidelines for dealing effectively with a customer complaint.

### **Validate the customer’s perspective.**

This doesn’t mean that you necessarily agree with the customer’s opinion or perception of events, and it doesn’t obligate you to share their stated interests. But before expecting a customer to understand and appreciate YOUR situation, they need to know that you understand and appreciate THEIRS.

### **Define the problem explicitly.**

The problem is the problem, not the customer. So make sure you define the problem as clearly as possible. Studies on employee/customer disputes show that about 75% of the time, individuals are disagreeing about different issues. Ask the customer "What’s the issue?" then "What’s your concern here?" or "What do you want to accomplish?" and "How can we work this out?"

### **Ask better questions.**

If you’ve asked a question like “what can we do to make you happy?” or “what will it take to resolve this?” and the response isn’t workable, don’t ask that question again. You’ll just get the same answer and reinforce the customer’s determination to achieve the unworkable outcome. Instead try asking a better question to get a more productive, workable response. “Are you willing to explore creative options? or “Would you be willing to discuss a flexible approach to resolving this?” are questions designed to bring forth a better customer response.

### **Listen actively.**

Listen with the intent to understand the customer's problem and their perception; not just with the intent to respond with a solution. Listen for emotions, and pay attention to body language, so that you have a full appreciation of what the customer is thinking and feeling.

**Communicate directly.**

One of the best ways to defuse a conflict is to address it openly. Put the problem on the table where everyone can see it. This will start the process. The differences that caused the difficulty can only go away when we ask and listen without judgment.

**Ask for their advice.**

Even though your ego may resist this, this can be a good proactive step toward resolving a conflict. It's a sign of respect, and for many dissatisfied customers, the core issue underneath their complain is a feeling of not being respected or appreciated. This is also a subtle way of getting customers to tell you more of what they want.

**Don't just fix the problem.**

Don't think that simply fixing the problem guarantees that the customer will come back. If you go to dinner at a restaurant and your meal comes out over-cooked, what usually happens? If you complain, (remember, this means 25 other dissatisfied customers won't) most of the time the waiter will replace the meal. So the problem is fixed. Will that get you back to the restaurant? It might, but take it a step further. Maybe the waiter will take that meal off of the bill as a way of apologizing for the inconvenience. Will that get you back? Possibly, but most likely it will take more than that.

The goal here is not just to fix the problem, but to give the customer a reason to want to come back and give the restaurant another try. So remember, while you may have to focus your immediate attention on a specific problem or issue, your real goal is to insure that you retain a loyal, satisfied customer.