CHAPTER 5: HANDLING DIFFICULT CUSTOMER SITUATIONS

A Guide to Customer Service Skills for the Service Desk Professional

Third Edition
OBJECTIVES

• The power of a positive attitude

• Why customers sometimes behave in challenging ways

• Proven techniques to handle irate, difficult, and demanding customers

• How to respond, not react, to difficult customer situations

• Positive steps to stay calm and in control
• Most customers are pleasant, calm, and appreciative of analysts’ efforts

• There are times when customers become upset, angry, and demanding

• These difficult situations can be extremely stressful

• You cannot control your customers’ behavior

• You can control your response to their behavior

• You can develop the skills needed to handle even the most difficult situations
TOPIC 1:
THE POWER OF A
POSITIVE ATTITUDE
"THINGS TURN OUT BEST TO
PEOPLE THAT MAKE THE BEST OF
THE WAY THINGS TURN OUT."

- John Wooden
We all have bad days

Most customers who contact the service desk are reasonable, pleasant, and grateful for your help

Difficult customer situations are the exception, not the rule

Difficult situations can affect your attitude and your interactions with customers

Try to consider and treat each customer and each situation as unique
• **Empathy** – The act of identifying with and understanding another person’s situation, feelings, and motives

• Being empathetic does not mean you are responsible

• It is your responsibility to acknowledge that the customer is upset and do everything you can to help

• The frustration a customer experiences dealing with a technical problem may be compounded when he or she tries to obtain support

• Your company or department may be responsible for situations that cause frustration or confusion
• Broken promises
• Long wait times
• Confusing telephone menus
• Confusing user instructions or online help
• Unmet expectations
• Having to call or e-mail back repeatedly
• Having to repeat details previously provided
• Looming deadlines
• Negative phrases

• Poor product quality
• Rude analysts
• Being placed on hold without being asked
• Being placed on hold for an extended period of time
• Web sites that are difficult to navigate, inaccurate, or incomplete
• Web sites that fail to offer alternate ways to obtain support
• Remember that there is always something that you can do

• Communicate each and every customer complaint to management

• Give your customers the benefit of the doubt; they may just be having a bad day

• Be honest and don’t blame customers for your lack of patience or negative attitude
  • Maybe you are the one having a bad day!

• Strive to be positive and professional at all times
• Working with difficult customers requires patience and composure

• How you respond to difficult customers, particularly during the early moments of your conversation, will greatly influence their perception and willingness to work with you

• You can make a difficult situation worse by failing to:
  • Listen
  • Empathize with the customer’s situation
  • Communicate with positive statements
Step 1. Get Focused:

- Take a deep breath. Put a smile on your face. Sit or stand up straight. Get your notepad ready.

Step 2. Let the Customer Vent:

- An upset or angry customer has a story to tell
- You must let the customer tell that story from beginning to end
- Until each point is made, the customer cannot calm down
- Listen actively and look for cues that the customer is ready for you to begin taking control
Step 3. Listen Actively:

- Resist the temptation to ask questions
- Nod your head or use encouraging verbal phrases
  - “Uh-huh.”
  - “Go on.”
  - “I see.”
  - “I understand.”
- Listen carefully for the central theme of the person’s incident or complaint
- Take notes and be prepared to restate what you have heard
Step 4. Acknowledge the Customer’s Emotional State:

- A customer needs to feel that you care and that you fully understand the situation.
- Acknowledge the customer’s emotion:
  - Even if you don’t understand why the customer has that emotion.
- Empathize or at least accept that this customer may be having a really bad day and needs your help.
- Respectfully use the customer’s name and communicate your desire to do all you can.
- Sincerely apologize if your company has caused any inconvenience.
Step 4. Acknowledge the Customer’s Emotional State (continued):

• “Miss Navarro, I’m sorry our field service engineer did not arrive at the time promised. Let me find out what happened. Would you like to hold while I contact his office, or would you like me to call you back?”

• “Mr. Sheng, I understand that you are very upset. I will do everything I can to get this printer problem resolved right away.”
Step 5. Restate the Situation and Gain Agreement:

• You must gain agreement that you fully understand the situation and the customer’s expectation about when a solution will be delivered

• Restate the problem
  • Use the customer’s exact words when possible

• Use a verifying statement
  • “Is that correct?”

• Ask for clarification when you do not understand
  • “I’m sorry, I’m confused. Could you repeat...”
Step 6. Begin Active Problem Solving:

• If steps 1 through 5 were followed, the customer should have calmed down

• Begin diagnosing the incident and developing an action plan

• Stay focused!

• If necessary, repeat some or all of these steps for handling a difficult situation
Customers do not start out irate

- They’re typically just frustrated or confused

In most cases, anger can be avoided

- Use the technique for handling difficult situations
- Properly handle situations such as placing customer on hold and transferring customers

People experience varying degrees of anger

Initially, a customer describes the inconvenience of the incident or situation

- “I’ve had to wait 20 minutes to get through. Why can’t you people learn to pick up the telephone?”
• To calm the customer and gain his or her confidence:
  • Acknowledge the customer’s frustration
  • State that you will do all you can
  • “I’m sorry to keep you waiting. How can I help you?”

• If you fail to acknowledge the customer’s emotion, the customer may become angry
  • He or she perceives you do not understand or that you are not listening
  • “You’re not listening. Let me say it again.”
• If you are listening, you have not communicated that you are listening

• You may have acknowledged what the customer said, but not how the customer said it

• The customer is either going to give you one more chance or he is going to ask to speak with someone else

• Make sure you understand how to engage help if you need it
Technique for handling offensive or abusive language

1. Let the customer know you want to help. “I am sorry there has been a problem. I will do everything I can to assist you.”

2. If after venting the customer continues to use offensive language, ask the customer to speak in a professional manner. “I'm trying to assist you. Could you speak in a professional manner?”

3. If the customer continues to use offensive language, let the customer know you are going to take action if the language persists. “I appreciate your frustration [anger, concern] and I'm trying to assist you. If you cannot speak in a professional manner I will have to transfer you to my supervisor.”

4. If the customer cannot speak in a professional manner, take action. “As you are unable to speak in a professional manner, please hold while I transfer you to my supervisor.”
Some customers will become irate even if you have done your best

- They may have unrealistic expectations
- They may be trying to manipulate you
- They may be under so much stress that they are incapable of calming down

Ensure that your actions do not drive customers to their irate state

Understand that customers may be responding to your behavior, or what they perceive is your behavior, when they become increasingly angry

Keep it positive and focus on what you can do
• Dissatisfied customers will continue doing business with a company if their incidents and complaints are consistently handled quickly and cheerfully.

• Never assume that just because a customer seems happy when you complete a contact that you have regained that customer’s trust.

• Patience and consistent follow-through are required to repair a damaged relationship.
**Follow-through** – The act of keeping your promises, including getting back to the customer when you said you would—even if you don’t have a resolution to the incident.

**Follow-up** – The act of having a service desk or company representative verify that the customer’s incident has been resolved to the customer’s satisfaction and that the incident has not recurred.
• While uncomfortable, following up is the only way to repair a damaged relationship

• It enables you and the customer to feel comfortable when working together in the future

• When situations are handled properly, even the most disgruntled customer can become the service desk’s greatest advocate
TOPIC 2: KEEPING YOURSELF IN CONTROL
KEEPING YOURSELF IN CONTROL

Be prepared for difficult situations!

• Learn to respond, not react
• Stay calm under pressure
• Get ready for your next contact
LEARNING TO RESPOND, NOT REACT

• Reacting is easy
  • Without thinking you say or do the first thing that comes to mind

• Responding involves making a conscious choice to control your behavior

• As a professional, it is your responsibility to act in a positive, constructive way, regardless of the customer’s behavior

• Try to think rationally about what the customer needs and respond calmly to that need
• People experience stress and pressure differently

• Learning to stay calm under pressure requires that you learn to control your behavior

• As a human being, you can “lose your mind” on any given day

• This is because different sides of our brain handle logic and emotion
• The two sides of our brain work together

• In most people, one side dominates the other

• Avoid the temptation to focus only on problem solving (left brain) when someone is in an emotional state (right brain)
Determining the dominant side of your brain may be helpful.

“Left-brained” people tend to be logical thinkers and may have a difficult time understanding why other people become emotional.

- Left-brained thinkers must learn to listen for and acknowledge emotion.

“Right-brained” people may become emotional fairly quickly in a difficult situation.

- Right-brained thinkers must learn to control their own emotions.
remain calm and in control at all times

If you become upset or angry, neither you nor the customer is going to be able to bring the situation under control or solve the problem.

Learn the symptoms that you experience when you are getting upset or angry.

- Clenched jaw
- Concentration loss
- Grinding teeth
- Headache
- Nausea
- Neck and shoulder tension
- Rapid heart rate
- Reddening face
- Shallow breathing
- Strained tone of voice
- Sweating
Use calming techniques to stay focused

• Take a deep breath
• Sip water
• Use positive imagery
• Use positive self-talk
• Take a deep breath to:
  • Lesson tension
  • Resume a normal breathing rate

• Sip water to:
  • Lubricate your throat
  • Help restore your voice to its normal pitch
Use positive imagery to:

• Influence your thinking in a positive way

• Envision yourself standing next to the customer, looking at the incident
Use positive self-talk to:

- Eliminate negative thoughts and attitudes by using positive words
- “I know what to do.”

Practice makes these calming techniques a habit

- Role play with another analyst
- Record and listen to your calls
- Listen to other analyst’s calls
- Review difficult calls in staff meetings

Customers respond positively to analysts who are calm, confident, and in control
Some difficult situations are more draining than others

Factors that influence your ability to recover from a difficult situation include:

- What time of day the situation occurs
- Your level of preparedness
- Your personal mood

Take the time you need to compose yourself before handling your next contact

Give yourself the opportunity to let your positive, can do attitude shine through
Techniques for recovering from a particularly upsetting situation

- Inform your team leader or supervisor
- Take a short break
- Avoid caffeine or other stimulants
- Employ stress-coping mechanisms
TOPIC 3: CHAPTER SUMMARY
• Most customers are pleasant, calm, and appreciative of your efforts

• Difficult customer situations are the exception, not the rule

• Difficult customer situations can be extremely stressful and can affect your attitude—if you let them
• Proven techniques enable you to understand, acknowledge, and address the emotional needs of customers as well as their technical needs

• Consistent follow-through and follow-up enable you to maintain your customer’s goodwill and repair a damaged relationship

• When difficult situations are handled properly, even the most disgruntled customer can become the service desk’s greatest advocate
• It is important to be prepared for difficult situations

• By thinking rationally and staying calm at all times, you can learn to respond, not react, to difficult situations

• Learn the symptoms that you experience when you are under pressure

• Use calming techniques to relieve these symptoms so you can focus on meeting your customer’s needs

• Take the time to compose yourself before you handle a new contact
• Each and every difficult situation you handle will increase your confidence and your ability to handle future situations.

• In time, you will find these situations less stressful because you have the skills needed to calm yourself and your customer and to stay in control at all times.

• Practice the techniques discussed in this chapter so you can handle difficult situations with confidence.