



A Formula That Works

How to Turn Even the Most Difficult Customer Into Your Biggest Fan

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Great companies realize that no matter what you sell, whether it's a product or a service, what you are actually selling is an experience. Your customers can usually buy the same thing from someone else, so you have to provide them with something they can't find at any other place — an experience. Only through intentional planning and employee training can you guarantee that the experience they have is exceptional.

No other time is more crucial to the customer experience than the moment they have a complaint. Research shows that 55 percent of people said they switched to a different company after having a bad customer service experience. How your company handles customer complaints has the power to not only build your business and eliminate losses, but to create raving fans.

Customer service consultant and co-author of "Who's Your Gladys — How to Turn Even the Most Difficult Customer Into Your Biggest Fan," Marilyn Suttle, breaks the customer complaint experience down into a simple formula, E plus R equals O. "E" is the event or whatever happened that led to the customer complaint. Then you get "O," which is the outcome and may be either bad or good. Typically the "R," or response, for most people is an automatic re-

action, especially if you are a person who has a difficult time dealing with emotional or angry people. But the response is where you really have the power to turn the situation around.

listen and give them time to vent and feel fully heard. Only then will they be receptive.

- Apologize and mean it, whether the customer is really wrong or not. Re-

"You share the mistakes so that they don't happen again. Encourage your employees to bring solutions and not just problems. Customers are not just problems, they're people. Being brilliant at managing emotion and developing the proper response to difficult situations will put you at the top of your game and miles ahead of the competition."

Marilyn Suttle, author

It's a simple and logical way to look at a volatile situation that helps you see how the right response to a difficult event will affect the outcome of the situation and your bottom line as a business.

Suttle describes the proper response process in five steps:

- Thank the customer for complaining, and mean it. A genuine thank-you is disarming and takes the tension down a notch.
- Encourage the customer to share more. Use statements like, "Please tell me more. Is there anything else I should know?" As tempting as it is to cut them off mid-sentence and offer a solution, it's more important to

regardless of what actually happened, something went wrong, and as a business you want to make the situation better. Never use the word "if" in an apology. It agitates the customer and negates your company's sense of responsibility.

- Ask your customers, "What can I do to set things right?" Often the customer will ask for much less than you would have otherwise offered. Feeling heard and knowing you care de-escalates their frustration.
- When appropriate, offer a little more than expected. This is where a tool like a service recovery kit would come in. A service recovery kit is an easily accessible packet for your em-

employees to utilize in certain customer situations. The kit could include things like coupons for the next service visit, a gift card for gas or even just a Starbucks gift card. That little something extra, when given at the right time and with the right attitude, will really “wow” your customer. The key is not to use it too quickly or the customer will feel like you’re trying to buy them off.

- Let the customer know that you will follow up and investigate the situation to ensure a better result in the future. Then, close the loop later by contacting the customer to let them know what’s been done.

Having a list of the proper steps is a great start, but when a customer comes in and emotions start flying, it’s easy for even the best laid plans to go out the window. That is where

proper training and procedures come in.

“Choose a team leader from your front line to lead the training, because research shows that a process is more likely to stick if employees know their peers are going to handle it the same way,” Suttle said.

Have your employees discuss possible complaint situations on an ongoing basis and how best to offer great customer service.

“It’s crucially important to not only empower your front-line employees to handle complaints with proper training, but also to have a designated process for sharing those complaints with management and other team members,” Suttle said.

By setting up a non-accusatory system for bringing the complaints back to the team, it will allow you as an op-

erator or team leader to see if there is a reoccurring pattern. Then you have the perspective you need to change the problem system or action so customers do not continue to experience the same complaint.

As an owner or manager, you have to develop a culture where mistakes can be seen as a chance to improve your business through shared knowledge of challenges and solutions.

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