

Let's Talk: Communicating with an angry customer

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Hi everyone, my name is Tina and I am a mental health professional. Let's talk about communicating with an angry customer.

Stay calm

When dealing with an angry customer, most important will be keeping yourself calm. We all know and have experienced that this is easier said than done, but it has consistently been shown that when dealing with an upset customer if a person keeps their own self calm by not matching the tone of voice or rude remarks made it will be less likely to escalate the customer's upset further.

To help your own self remain calm consider focusing on your breathing or say a positive affirmation to yourself in your head and don't give into the pressure of rushing to respond to what the customer is saying. It can benefit them to have space to express or vent their frustration and can benefit you to not immediately respond but have time to calm yourself.

Listen

Another consideration when dealing with an angry customer is how you are listening to them. Whether you are speaking with the customer over the phone or in-person it will be important that you signal to them that they are being heard, even if you don't agree with what they are saying, or it seems irrational. Most angry communications stem from an individual simply not feeling heard.

To support this, I encourage you to use your best active listening skills, which could include eye contact and an open posture if you are speaking to them in-person, the use of verbal comments to show you are following along as they are talking such as "uh huh", "okay", "yes". and asking them questions to clarify their thoughts in a respectful way to show you are genuinely trying to understand what they are saying.

It can also be helpful when actively listening to the angry customer to paraphrase or repeat back to them what you think you heard them say, to give them the opportunity to clarify or correct misunderstandings or misinterpretations.

Empathize

Acknowledging what the angry customer is saying without agreeing with them can show empathy for the distress they are feeling in that moment. Empathize that they are experiencing strong negative emotions, regardless of why they are upset.

Examples could include, “I can imagine the frustration feeling that you were promised one thing and got something else” or “I appreciate you sharing your concern with me” or “I am hearing the inconvenience you have felt from this issue”.

It can also be helpful to use words to show you want to be helpful, focusing on what you can do for them, avoiding the focus on what you can't do or what your employer's policies don't allow. Try to align yourself with the customer as an ally to solve the problem together.

If possible or appropriate for the situation, enlist the customer in the solution finding process. Ask the customer what they would like to see as a solution or possibly provide a menu of options or solutions they can select their preference from.

Learn your customer service policy

There may be some customers, despite your best communication efforts that are not able to deescalate or calm themselves and may make abusive or threatening remarks or behaviors toward you. It will also be important to know your employer's customer service policies around these abusive customers.

This may include policies around escalating the customer to a manager or supervisor, or informing them you will have to ask them to leave or hang up the phone if they are unable to respond in a respectful way and following through with that action if they do not deescalate. If you are unsure of your employer's policies reach out to your manager or HR team for further guidance.

I appreciate you spending a few minutes with me today and I do hope that you are feeling better prepared for when an angry customer might come your way.

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