

What You Need to Know About Managing Customer Dissatisfaction

Manny Roman

One of the true joys of providing good customer service is seeing a smile on the face of a satisfied customer. It's a sign that you've done your job and the customer appreciates it.

If you're running a good operation, chances are those happy clients far outnumber the disgruntled ones. But no matter how good a job you do, you simply cannot please everyone. You will have to deal with the occasional dissatisfied customer.

The key is to identify the customer's real reason or reasons for being dissatisfied, and to manage the situation in an effective, professional manner. Naturally, this is easier said than done. So let's take it one step at a time.

Dealing with an unhappy or irate customer can be disconcerting, particularly if it's your first such encounter, or if you feel you lack the confidence to handle the situation. But the first thing you should understand is that the customer is probably not really angry with you, but is instead angry about the situation. If you view the encounter as a personal attack on you—even if it is—you've already lost.

Becoming emotionally involved in the situation in that way will usually prove detrimental to the communication process and the managing of the customer's dissatisfaction. This does not mean that you shouldn't share the customer's sense of urgency. You have to demonstrate a genuine concern for the customer's problem.

But to develop a resolution to the problem that is acceptable to you and to the customer, you must first understand the cause of the customer's dissatisfaction.

Causes of Dissatisfaction

Customers typically become dissatisfied as a result of one (or more) of three main reasons: A performance problem, a misunderstanding, or their own unrealistic expectations.

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Check Points

What can clinical engineering departments contribute to the equipment planning process?

- ✓ The clinical engineering (CE) department can provide historical data on how well an equipment has performed over its lifetime.
- ✓ CE departments can sort through compatibility issues between current medical equipment items and new equipment.

Performance Problems

Performance problems can be divided into two categories: "Equipment" performance and "people" performance.

If the issue is an equipment performance problem, then a machine fault or (in my business) perhaps an image quality problem is the cause. These are the problems that you go through years of training to learn how to fix.

If it is a people performance issue, then there are two possible scenarios: Deficiency in knowledge or deficiency in execution.

A knowledge deficiency means the employee did not know that he or she was supposed to push a switch or close a door, for example. In that case, you must train them on what should have been done.

A deficiency in execution means the employee knew what to do, but did not do it. Perhaps he or she forgot to do it, or was careless. These are human failings, so it's important to remind the employee in a respectful manner what they should have done.

Misunderstanding

A misunderstanding typically results from a communications problem. It is critically important to clearly articulate to a customer the details of your transaction with them, so that he or she fully understands the results they

should expect. Not establishing this full and complete understanding is a common mistake that often causes problems down the road.

Unrealistic Expectations

Customers typically generate their own unrealistic expectations. For example, a customer might wonder why a package can't be shipped from Ohio to Australia and arrive in three hours. In such a scenario, I tend to provide the customer with a "gently foolish feeling," in which I explain in a lighthearted way why such a request would be impossible to fulfill.

But the most important thing is to explain to the customer what you CAN do for them. If you simply tell them that you cannot do something, they are likely to become upset. But if you politely present them with an array of reasonable options, they are likely to be satisfied with at least one of them.

Managing Customer Dissatisfaction

The first action to take with a dissatisfied customer is to acknowledge their concern. This does not mean that you necessarily agree with their position, but that you are aware of their concerns and that you share their sense of urgency in addressing that concern.

Statements that acknowledge a customer's concern include:

- "I understand how you feel."
- "I can see that you're upset at having to reschedule patients."
- "I know how important good images are to you."

These statements simply indicate your awareness of the customer's feelings.

Feel-Felt-Found Method

The above statements of understanding are the first component of the "Feel-Felt-Found" method of managing customer dissatisfaction. The method goes something like this: "I understand how you FEEL. Others have FELT the same way under similar circumstances. We have FOUND that if we do 'ABC' and 'DEF,' that your concerns will be satisfactorily addressed."

This method informs the customer that you are sensitive to their concerns, and that you are capable of taking care of them. The power comes from demonstrating empathy (FEEL), taking away the uniqueness of their situation (FELT), and having found a workable solution from previous experience (FOUND).

List and Drain Method

Another effective technique used to manage a very upset customer is the List and Drain method. When implemented in a respectful manner, it often works well. The idea is to take out a pen or pencil and paper, approach the customer so that he or she is able to see what you are writing, and slowly list each and every one of the customer's objections or concerns. This serves to slow down the interaction, allowing the customer time to cool down, or "drain." It also allows the customer to realize exactly what he or she is saying—including the ridiculous comments, such as "I don't even like the color of the machine." This technique may defuse the situation enough for you to get to the real cause of dissatisfaction. You must take care not to upset the customer further when using this technique, however.

Informing of Actions

Once you have determined the real cause of the customer's dissatisfaction, you should inform the customer of the actions you can take to help address his or her concerns. This is the time to explore the available options, and the degree to which each option will meet expectations. It is critical to gain the customer's acceptance of the solution, as this is what the customer will remember most about the situation.

Closing the Call

Once the customer's needs have been reasonably met, a review of the actions taken to address the concerns or problems is needed. This is to ensure that you do not leave the customer with misunderstandings or unrealistic expectations, and to ensure that he or she is satisfied with your actions. This is also an appropriate time to warn of possible future problems that could arise.

The final step is to thank the customer, remaining concerned but emotionally uninvolved from start to finish. This will help to prevent problems from resurfacing.

If you tell the customer, "boy, I thought you were going to explode a couple of times there," they may be insulted and may—well, explode. Remaining courteous and professional, even after all concerns are satisfactorily addressed, is always the best course of action.

If you push the right buttons, that irritable customer just may end up wearing the smile of a satisfied customer. ■

Want to learn more about the three-step strategic planning process? Check out *BI&T Extra*. Go to www.aami.org/publications/BI&T/index.html.