



anger management

Dealing with angry customers while keeping your cool can be quite the challenge. By looking at these situations as opportunities to improve, you can strengthen your business.

By Adam Terese

Customers from hell, it turns out, can teach you a lot. As a former manager in the trademark research business, Chuck Dennis' best client had the worst mouth, spelling out every mistake and problem in the research. "He would just lay me out, yell and cuss at me," Dennis says. "I tried to hold my tongue and not get back in this guy's face. But once I got past the anger, he was always right."

Instead of taking the tough talk as an insult, Dennis decided to use it as free business advice. The company implemented a new system to ensure accuracy. Work quality went up. The number of clients increased. Sometimes it pays to shut up and listen, he says.

Now an "angry customer strategist" or customer service consultant for the Cambridge, Mass.-based Knowledge Associates, Dennis still believes that experience was the genesis of his customer service philosophy: Angry customers can be an opportunity. A little too much lip, of course, can wipe the smile off anyone's face, but angry and rude customers are a reality for every business, he says. Deal with them recklessly and real damage can be done, causing word to spread and customers to flee. But rectifying the issue can bring greater benefits. A study from customer experience consultancy Technical Assistance Research Programs found customers who had a problem resolved by a company are more loyal than customers who never experienced a problem with it.

"When stuff hits the fan, that's when you show

the measure of a customer-focused business," Dennis says. But the question remains: What does it take to convert these alienated, angry customers into loyal ones?

Shut Up and Listen

Hiring and training the right employees is a good start, Dennis says. Customer service is not an intuitive thing. "The customer service role is oftentimes the lowest-paid role, but this is the face of your organization, so you want someone intelligent who can think on their feet," Dennis says.

For a lawn and garden retailer, most customers become angry or rude when returning faulty products, says Beth Zwinak, manager of Tagawa Gardens in Centennial, Colo. But in general, angry customers get angry because businesses don't measure up to their expectations, Dennis says. Because of this, it's important to get past that anger to the real message: Why is the customer angry, and what can we do to help?

To reach that point, Tony Fulmer, manager of Chalet in Wilmette, Ill., tells his employees to defuse tough situations by listening. That includes being aware of nonverbal communication. Instead of seemingly rude gestures, like crossing the arms or tapping the foot, Fulmer urges employees to keep an open body posture and lean forward. Those gestures help show the customers their concern matters. "A lot of times there are things that are not our fault, but the customer feels they've been wronged," Fulmer says.

Getting defensive, on the other hand, is the worst thing an employee can do. After all, listening without interruption can be tough. "If



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Negative or dissatisfied customers can be a nuisance, but they can also teach valuable lessons. It pays to listen to what they say — and address their problems.

someone gets in your face, naturally you're going to want to — depending on your personality — either burst into tears and run away or get back in their face," Dennis says. Retail employees have to be a little bit better, he says. They can't be just human.

Apologize for the Experience

But that doesn't mean the customer is always

right. "That's almost like a license for wackos to come in like they own the joint," says Dennis. The customer is, however, always the customer, so business owners should always apologize for the inconvenience, whether the business is at fault or not. "In a business relationship, you have a customer and seller," Dennis says. "Whoever is giving the money gets more slack. They get to be angry. They shouldn't be made to feel wrong."

An apology, after all, is not an admission of guilt. Even if she does not agree with a customer's issue, Zwinak says she'll still apologize for their experience. In each of those imperfect experiences, Zwinak will review the situation and determine what, if anything, to change to be better prepared next time.

"I'd rather the customer tell *us* the problem than their friends," she says.

Keep Them Coming Back

Only after an apology should a business try to set things right, Dennis says. Sometimes it's an explanation or a refund. Other times, it's something more. Fulmer remembers a woman two years ago who used a fungicide — recommended by someone at the garden center — on some Boston ivy that covered the entire back of her large house. It burned off all the foliage. But the biggest issue was the 100-person graduation party she was holding the same day near the ivy.

Suffice it to say, she wasn't just looking for money back on the fungicide. "I said, 'What can I do to make you happy?'" Fulmer says. To resolve the issue, he sent a delivery man with a rake and ladder to the house, where he removed every brown leaf on the ivy. He then put 10 new vines in decorative pots to help keep things pretty while waiting for the ivy to recover. "She's still a customer to this day," Fulmer says.

That's an extreme case, but Fulmer says his business will usually replace products for a customer and will often rectify the issue with a \$25 gift card — the proverbial "cherry on top." At Tagawa, Zwinak sends apologetic letters and a gift card to customers. There are limits, though. Once, a customer brought back an item six months after the purchase, but Fulmer would not take it back.

Education can be a subtle way to make angry customers realize a mistake is their own. When customers bring backs plants that clearly weren't cared for properly, Fulmer will try to get to the bottom of the problem and then pass the advice to the customer. He'll also usually replace the flowers, even if policy technically does not allow it.

No matter the experience level, managers should empower action if a problem arises. "It's really important to empower employees and have an organization for this in the structure of your business," Fulmer says.

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When You Can't Take the Heat

Listening and apologizing can placate most customers, but every so often "there's the fringe lunatic that comes off the street and just wants everything," Dennis says. These people "go beyond any customer service strategy," he says. "Realize they're probably not your target client." Ruckus-raising customers can attract unneeded attention to the business from its customers.

In those cases, it's important to get the person off the sales floor, so other customers won't be disturbed, Zwinak says. She advises employees

to stay calm and ask valid questions. If a customer starts to use foul language, it's important to make clear that the language is unacceptable. "It usually stops them and they end up apologizing." If things get physically or verbally violent, there's always security.

Still, interacting with customers requires caution. When she first started at Tagawa, Zwinak remembers a customer who was angry that her bulbs weren't blooming. Zwinak was sympathetic but didn't do anything beyond

that. The customer was still angry. Turns out the customer was friends with one of the center's owners.

"You need to look at the whole picture when you look at what seems like an isolated incident," she says. "Treat everyone like they are friends of the owners." ❧

Adam Terese is web editor of Lawn & Garden Retailer. He can be reached at aterese@sgcmail.com.

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