

# IS THE CUSTOMER ALWAYS RIGHT?

Good customer service goes a long way in keeping your customer content. Consider establishing a customer service plan and training your employees in your retail rules to keep everyone — employees and customers alike — happy.

By Carol Hacker

**T**he age-old expression “the customer is always right” means different things to different people. Some customers expect you to bend over backwards to meet their expectations no matter how grandeur. They believe they are right no matter what! In their minds, their loyalty to you depends totally on the business owner’s, manager’s or sales associate’s treatment of customers. On the flip side, you are in business to make money, not to cater to that small minority of customers that makes unrealistic demands. So where is the balance?

Maybe there is no balance, but there is a way to handle that difficult handful of buyers. I’m talking about the people who want to pay less than your cost or want to use an expired coupon. I’m talking about customers that disrespect your employees or insist on returning merchandise beyond the time-frame the policy permits. Saying goodbye to this kind of customer isn’t hard, especially if you focus on making up for lost revenues with your current customers and prospects.

## Who Comes First?

Another familiar saying is “the customer comes first.” It has been argued that if your employees don’t come first, your customers will bear the brunt of that kind of thinking. Growing up in Wisconsin, I spent a lot of my youth in my parents’ hardware store. However, it was second fiddle to my dad’s dream of owning a lawn and garden business. With a love for everything green, even in the upper Midwest where the growing season is short, he thought he could make a go of it. Unfortunately, he didn’t get the chance. I believe he would have been successful because of his strong business sense and extraordinary ability to deal with people. He understood that customer relations are a 2-way street and that the customer is not always right. Customers may be the lifeblood of the business, but they sometimes complain to get free merchandise and do other things to make life difficult or cheat the owner. My dad finally concluded ▶



Salespeople are on the front line with customers (and the problems that arise) day in and day out. Every employee who interfaces with customers must also be trained to handle customer problems.

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that some people are not happy unless they are unhappy!

It's hard to keep all of your customers content, but by establishing and training your employees regarding retail rules, or what I call a customer service plan for your

business, you will be able to effectively meet the needs of all of your buyers. It's no secret customers are lost when service is poor. Customer service is a state of mind for every owner and manager. Taking time to put a plan in place will help mini-

mize customer, as well as employee, complaints. Your goal is to turn bad situations into positive outcomes!

### Your Customer Service Plan

A basic introduction to your busi-

Spend as much time as necessary so all of your employees have a clear picture and a definite goal of how to respond to customer-related problems with confidence, credibility and tact.

ness, even for seasonal or part-time employees, is not enough. Spend as much time as necessary so all of your employees have a clear picture and a definite goal of how to respond to customer-related problems with confidence, credibility and tact. Even a small, family-owned garden center should have a new-employee orientation process in place. This is the time to discuss the guidelines for handling customers as well as their complaints. When something goes wrong, customers are most concerned about how to voice a complaint, to whom to complain and how the complaint will be handled by management. Get your employees off to a head start by teaching them what they need to know. Here are some ideas you may want to include in your customer service plan.

**Keep promises.** In an effort to sell, some employees may promise more than they can deliver, especially if a commission or bonus is at stake. This can quickly lead to disgruntled customers. Make sure employees understand the importance of avoiding promises they cannot keep.

**Make it easy.** Ensure your complaint process is easy for customers as well as employees to use. Nothing is more frustrating to customers than "the runaround." Employees are embarrassed when this happens, too. Do you have a customer service department or, at the very least, a designated area where customers can complain or ask for help with a problem? A sign at your point of sale could say, "If for any reason you are not happy with your purchase, please call this number and ask to speak with 'Customer Service.'" Then provide the appropriate phone number.

**Keep cool.** There may be times when an angry employee may feel like yelling at a nasty customer, but doing so will only make matters worse. There is no place for uncontrolled behavior in your business. Employees ▶

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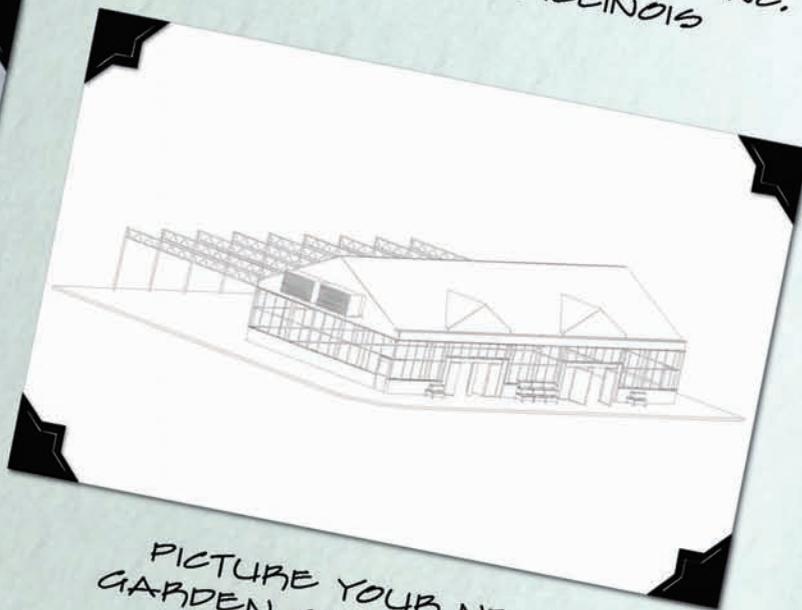
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may need an outlet when this happens; it's up to the owner or manager to provide one or at least help and teach employees how to constructively deal with tough situations.

**Never argue.** Along the same lines as managing tempers, your employees must understand and

respect the importance of never arguing with a customer, no matter how pushy the customer gets. Even if the employee wins the battle, he or she has lost the war.

**Tune in.** Listen for what the customer is NOT saying. You may get a sense that your customer feels dis-



Ensure your complaint process is easy for customers as well as employees to use. Designate an area or set up a phone number so customers have a place to air their complaints.

respected, ignored or unappreciated given the amount of money he or she has spent or is about to spend in your store. Teach your employees to tune into your customers' unspoken messages.

**Find a solution.** Focus on what you can do to resolve a problem. If your employees don't know how to handle common problems or have been overheard telling the customer, "It's against our policy" or "I've done all I can," your customers may be justifiably upset. Teach your employees how to solve problems creatively. If you have empowered them to make these kinds of decisions, give them the tools to do so. If they need to check with a supervisor on how to handle a customer's problem, make sure their supervisors also know what to do.

**Keep them calm.** Teach your employees how to calm an irate customer. When a customer loses his or her cool and draws attention to him or herself in the store, your other customers may feel uncomfortable. Most business owners have experienced this at one time or another. Resolution can be as easy as letting the customer vent in a place other than the sales floor. Another technique for dealing with a difficult situation is in the specific words that you choose to use. For example, try, "I'm very sorry this happened," "I understand where you're coming from" or "What can we do to make this right?" Stay away from phrases such as, "There is nothing more I can do," "I don't know how to make you happy" or "I can't do anything to change our policy in this case."

**Develop policies.** Establish return and refund policies that customers and employees clearly understand. Policies can include everything from a full refund with no questions asked to a time limit during which returns are accepted but only with a credit issued. There may also be circumstances when neither policy applies. A customer who regularly tries to abuse this policy is someone you can do without. For example, a woman who loves to shop for plants and flowers but fails to plant them in a timely manner

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and insists on returning those that have died is a “regular.” This is someone who will continue this pattern of behavior as long as it’s tolerated. After all, what you permit, you promote. Chances are you can afford to lose this customer who is costing you more than she is worth in terms of time and aggravation.

**Reward good decisions.** Encourage and reward staff members when they make good decisions that impact customers. Set a goal for all complaints to be handled promptly and in a helpful manner so consumers walk away feeling their shopping experiences with your business are positive. Mission accomplished!

Now reward employees with something as simple as a public thank you or a gift certificate or cash reward.

**Bend the rules.** There are times when employees may take the liberty of bending the rules, and that’s okay if you are in agreement. This doesn’t mean not charging or undercharging friends and/or family members for

When it comes to customer abuse, if the store has a system in place for handling difficult customers, it will take a lot of the pressure off of your employees.

their purchases. That’s stealing. Consider this: In working with a customer who can’t decide what he wants, the employee suggests the customer take several items home to try them out. We’re not talking about plants and flowers but other items, including statuary and decorative items. The customer will pay for what he takes but can return what he doesn’t want without hassle despite a “no returns” policy for discounted or slightly damaged items. The employee “bends the rules” to make the sale and satisfy the customer. However, keep in mind that if the employee understands where his authority lies, this should never become a problem for either the employee or supervisor.

**Stay calm.** Teach your employees how to manage stress. Salespeople are on the front line every day. They take abuse from customers as well as their own managers and even co-workers. When it comes to customer abuse, if the store has a system in place for handling difficult customers, it will take a lot of the pressure off of your employees. For example, an angry customer can be like a snowball rolling downhill. He or she can get more difficult to deal with as the minutes pass. The sales associate must be confident in his or her ability to handle the situation and never take it personally, because it’s not personal. When employees internalize verbal abuse, it can be very harmful, sometimes enough to convince the employee to quit. Help your employees learn how to manage stress and reduce employee turnover at the same time.

**Consider This**

As a business owner or manager, you know that the customer is NOT always right, but if you tell customers they are wrong, you are looking for trouble! Consider developing and implementing a business methodology and operating plan for dealing with unforeseen as well

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as unfortunate customer-related issues. Every employee who interfaces with customers should be trained to handle problems as they arise. The suggestions in this article are only the tip of the iceberg. Develop a customer service plan

that is unique to you and your business. Teach and empower your employees to handle difficult customers with an eye on what it will cost when you lose one or more buyers. Prevention is always better than the cure! ☺

Carol Hacker is a human resource consultant, seminar leader and author of 13 business books, including *Hiring Top Performers — 350 Great Interview Questions for People Who Need People*. She can be reached at (770) 410-0517.

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