



Customer Complaints: Do You Have the RIGHT Stuff?

By Patti Hathaway, Business Advisor & Author

Many customers will judge your company's effectiveness based on their first problem experience. Are you a "one and done" company? The customer contacts "one" person and that person handles the problem and it's "done" – taken care of. That's the ideal scenario for your customers and one that creates customer loyalty.

Let me share with you the nastiest letter I've ever read in all the time I've conducted customer loyalty training. This actual letter is from a customer who is obviously very, very angry about the service her bank provided. Here is her story. This is written, by the way, in September.

"For the second time since July 23, I am writing because you people do not get my address straight and are not sending my statements for 123456 and 789234. I have not had a savings account statement reach me since June 28. I have not received my checking account statement since July 27. I want you to send them and I want you to find my cancelled checks and send them too, now.

I'm a busy medical doctor and resident and neurologist at XYZ Medical Center who moved to this area a few months ago. I've dealt with many financial institutions in my life but have never yet dealt with one with a more amazing incapacity for customer service than ABC Bank. What do you have working for you – trained monkeys?

Every time I call your office about this, and it's been about four times, I'm informed that you still don't have my correct address on record. It comes out with a little variation every time. Now, if you were plumbers or sewer inspectors, it would not be so unexpected. However, you're a bank and you're supposed to have literate and numerate people working for you. Tell me, have you singled me out to victimize because I looked like a fun person to screw over? Or are you an equal opportunity and screw over all your customers?

Your staff sure feels sorry for themselves. Every time I call to complain, I get treated in a verbal manner as though I'm giving you people a hard time rather than the other way around. I spoke with a rude young person named so-and-so at the such-and-such office today who has now become the fourth or fifth person to give me this routine. Disgusted with his whiney phone manners, I asked that he have the branch manager phone me.

Here are my demands... (She wants her statements, cancelled checks, a letter of apology, and she wants it all done by a certain date)

If you don't do these things, then I assure you, you have not heard the last from me. I'll contact the FDIC. I'll contact my attorney. Then I'll contact the press.

I'll make your bank pay with public embarrassment for the time you're stealing from me, the time it takes me to write complaint letters like these, the time that I subtract from my studies and medical training. You see customers as nuisances rather than as your patrons. You see yourselves as doing the public some kind of big favor to let us invest money with you. Well, I'll tell you how I see you. You are nothing but a bunch of slovenly, hateful, uncaring, and incompetent people, the kind who compromise the cow patties in the pasture of life."

Angry customers will make you pay. However, they can also be beneficial. When someone has a complaint, that complaint is a gift. It's a gift for you to do something to help that person and to save their business for your organization.

Here are some key strategies to implement so that you can be a "one and done" employee. We'll use the acronym R.I.G.H.T. to see if you have the right stuff:

Rapport:

Build Rapport by acknowledging the customer as soon as they enter the place you work. For banks in particular, this also has another benefit -- Do you realize that most bank security officers and other retail establishments will tell you that the single greatest action you can take to prevent a robbery is to acknowledge people when they come into your banking center?

Use your customer's name during each interaction. It's simple and easy to get your customer's name off of their credit card or check – yet it makes all the difference for your customer's perception of your service! Can you tell me the eye color of each of your customers? If not, you probably didn't really make a connection with them.

When a customer comes to you with a problem, you need to listen to them. Take notes. Figure out exactly what the problem is and solve it. If you can solve their problem quickly and to their complete satisfaction 80 percent of the time, they'll become happy and loyal customers. When someone comes into your work place or calls you on the phone, do you listen long enough to figure out what their real problem is? Remember – YOU are your company to your customers. Do you ask enough questions to help determine the correct department that will be able to help them? Please don't just transfer them to any department to simply get rid of the "problem."

"The key to handling a "difficult" customer is to never lose sight of the fact that they are a customer. Love 'em or hate 'em, they keep the lights on."

Senior Vice President Branch Network Sales

Inform Customers What You Can Do To Help Them

The “I” in RIGHT stuff means to inform customers what you can do to help them. Be polite. Hear all your customer has to say without interrupting them. If they are on the phone, give them oral feedback that says you are listening: “Uh-huh.” “Okay. Let me summarize what you’ve said so far.” Your purpose is to solve the problem on their first call. Don’t force them to make multiple phone calls or trips because you didn’t fix their problem. Your goal is to be done with it. Ask questions if you need to. Restate the problem to the customer to make sure that you really understand their problem. At the end of your conversation with the customer, give them your name and phone number – “Ms. Customer - let me know if there is anything else I can do for you.” That’s informing customers what you can do to help them.

Know your company’s products and services. The weakest link in any customer service department is lack of knowledge. Does your company have an internal phone directory that is specific to the types of phone calls that come in so that you know where and to whom to transfer the customer? If not, make that suggestion to your training or marketing department.

Get the Problem Solved

This is really about problem ownership. Don’t argue with the customer. I dislike the comment “the customer is always right,” because the customer is *not* always right. But the point is, the customer is still the customer. I don’t care if they are not right. When you try to show that they are wrong, you just enflame them.

You make the phone calls for the customer. If it’s the customer’s third time that they’ve been transferred, wouldn’t it make sense for you to say, “Let me find out exactly who you need to speak to,” and spend a couple of extra minutes with the person to make sure you know where they can get their problem solved? The more you can own your customers’ problem, the better off they and your company will be.

Ask the customer how you can make it right. Apologize if the customer thinks your company made a mistake. The quickest way to get a customer over their anger is to apologize – why would they continue yelling at you when you just admitted that you (or the company) were wrong?

I had banked at a local establishment for a number of years when I decided to get a cash advance on my credit card for a vacation. When I got to the teller and asked her assistance, she proceeded to tell me that I had to go to "my bank" in order to get a cash advance. I assured her that this was my bank. Well, we went round and round about me having to go to "my bank" for the cash advance and that I was at my bank when finally she told me that I had to go to the bank that the credit card was issued from to get the cash advance.

Needless to say I was dumbfounded because the credit card was issued from a bank in Ohio and I live in Missouri. When I explained this to the teller, she raised

her hands (like she was being robbed), took three steps backward and said very loudly "I cannot help you". OK, now I was embarrassed because everyone, including the security guard was staring at me. I left without my cash advance.

What makes this story even more frightening is that a year or so later I was robbed at the ATM on the outside of the bank. I wanted to remove all of my money from the bank because I did not feel comfortable going to that bank any longer so I went with a friend one afternoon to close my account. When I explained that I wanted to close the account but knew that there would be an automatic withdrawal soon for a payment and that I wanted to leave that exact amount in the account to cover the payment then consider the account closed, the teller stated that it couldn't be done. I explained that I had been robbed and did not feel comfortable returning but she would not say anything but "I cannot help you" and yes, raised her hands as if she were being robbed and took three steps back. I asked if anyone could help and she pointed to a supervisor. I proceeded to the supervisor, explained my situation and request and you guessed it, the supervisor raised her hands, moved three steps back and said, "I cannot help you".

I left the bank very upset and still with the account open. I had to write a letter explaining the situation to close the account after the automatic withdrawal was made. To this day, my friend says that she wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't seen it for herself. The staff at this bank must have been trained to raise their hands, step back and say, "I cannot help you" in any situation that was unsolvable.

Cindy B., St. Louis, Missouri

In Cindy's situation, no one was willing to help her solve her problem. In fact, they made Cindy appear to be the problem. Keep in mind, many customers don't become a "problem" unless the bank has made a mistake in the first place.

Help The Customer Understand How You Have Solved the Problem

When you are trying to solve a problem, take the specific action necessary to solve their problem. Tell them what's going to happen next. Keep them informed throughout the problem resolution phase. If it's an account number or an address correction problem, follow-up with them and let them know how you handled their problem. Don't assume they will find out when they receive their next statement. The interesting thing about following-up is that this step is unexpected by most customers. By following up with the customer, you are showing that the customer's satisfaction is important to both you and your organization.

When I have promotional materials printed at my local Ink Well store, they always call me up. "Patti, how was your order? Were there any problems with it? Is there anything we can do to help you?" I know I can expect that follow-up phone call. I have never had a problem with my print job, but I always think to myself, "Wow, that was nice. They really value my business." Email me (patti@thechangeagent.com) if you want a copy of a form to keep track of your customer problems (thanks to Mike Ferrell, a Fifth Third Bank employee). You can adapt this form for your own situation.

Take Complaints as a Gift

Only when we begin viewing complaints as a gift and invitation for improvement from our customer will we be on the road to earning loyalty from our customers. How well do you handle complaints and criticism from your customers?

In the Spring 2002 issue of the Gallup Management Journal*, they reported one case where a major bank was still suffering from damaged customer relationships 14 months after a spate of service problems were poorly handled. Remember, when we have poor customer service, we take every opportunity we have to share that information with others. Negative word-of-mouth problems do not go away quickly.

Here's the good news about complaints that are handled well. When Gallup surveyed retail banking customers about whether they had a problem and how well the problem was handled by the customer service staff:

- of the respondents who did not experience a problem, only 26% considered themselves extremely satisfied with the bank on an overall basis, and
- of those respondents who had experienced a problem and were extremely satisfied with the way the way the problem was handled, 51% considered themselves extremely satisfied with the bank on an overall basis.

Gallup states, "If the company owns the problem, apologizes and undertakes a remedy, the customer's perceptions are validated and his value to the company is confirmed."

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The bottom line in handling customer complaints is that a true professional learns how to build a firm foundation out of the bricks that others throw at them. That is what handling complaints effectively can do for you . . . it can help you build a foundation of mutual respect and partnerships with your customers rather than building a barrier for protection from your customers.

Get On with Business by Getting Your Customer O.F.F. Their Problem

Your customers really don't want to switch to a competitor – it's just too much hassle to do that. Instead, make it easy for your customers to do business with you. Be committed to **O**wning, **F**ixing, and **F**ollowing Through on problem situations for your customers and they will keep on coming back to you.

Keep in mind, YOU are the company to your customers. Is that good news for your company? Be willing to lead the way in solving problems and overcoming barriers to providing exceptional customer service. Remember: the view upfront as a service leader far surpasses the view you will have if you are trying to catch your competitors from behind.

*This article was adapted from Patti Hathaway's recently released book, **Banking Secrets for Customer Loyalty: Handling Customer Problems**. This book is the first in a series of books for financial institutions on customer loyalty that you can purchase at www.thechangeagent.com as a 64 page perfect bound book or as an e-book. Patti Hathaway, CSP, The CHANGE AGENT, is one of fewer than 160 women worldwide to have earned the Certified Speaking Professional designation from the National Speakers Association for her proven presentation skills. She is the author of 6 books that have been translated into 5 languages and have sold over 100,000 copies. Patti provides highly customized solutions for your people problems. Contact her at 1-800-339-0973 or visit her website: www.thechangeagent.com for information on her speaking and consulting services, learning resources, or to receive her free monthly e-mail tips newsletter/blog.*