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Resolving Customer Complaints

by Troy Harrison

Here's the truth: We all screw up. Every salesperson, every company, every service department – we all mess up from time to time. What separates the truly successful companies – and the truly good customer relationships – is their ability to **recover** from screw-ups. If you handle the customer correctly when he's angry and dissatisfied, you can actually lay the groundwork for a stronger relationship than you had before. Here are the five keys to a successful recovery:

1. Understand. When a customer calls in and something is going wrong, there's a great chance that they will be on their worst behavior. You have to understand and allow for that. Some of what the customer says will be substantive and relate directly to the problem at hand, and some of it is simply venting. The best strategy is to let the customer vent while picking through the words to find the root of the problem. While you're at it, show understanding for how this failure on your company's part has affected the customer personally. Say you're sorry – and really mean it.

2. Fall On Your Sword. When something goes wrong, it's a natural impulse to look for someone to blame. It's even more natural to look for someone *else* to blame. If you want to really compound your customer's dissatisfaction, blame "that darned service department" or "the people in manufacturing." Guess what? Your customer is upset at your company, and he doesn't give the slightest rip which department is messing with his world. He just knows that he cuts the checks to your company and expects your company to fix it. And, at the moment, *you* are your company. Forget throwing someone else under the bus and get busy fixing the problem.

3. Find Some Solutions, Fast. Usually, you can find or devise a solution to the problem fairly quickly. Sometimes, however, you must rely on people outside your company (for instance, when you have to talk to the manufacturer). Don't be afraid to be the squeaky wheel that needs the grease if you're in that situation. Your customer is counting on you. Most importantly, *do not leave your customer hanging*. What your customer wants most from you is comfort and reassurance that their problem is in good hands with someone who cares. Forget to follow up and keep your customer in the loop, and they will think *you* don't care. When in doubt, follow up – even if it's to tell them you don't have an answer yet.

4. Follow Up. Too many salespeople think the problem is "solved" when the salesperson says it's solved. Nonsense. The problem is solved when the customer says it's solved, and not until then. Follow up and confirm their satisfaction.

5. Make It Up To Them. Truly successful recovery involves a token of appreciation. Your customer needs to know and remember that they weren't a hassle to you; that you are truly sorry that the problem happened; and that you're determined to make it right with them. Small tokens of appreciation go a long way here. Gift cards, branded promotional products or other sincere and valued gifts will remind the customer that you value the relationship.

As I said, do it right and you might be able to strengthen the relationship. Do it wrong, and you're easy prey for your competitors.

Troy Harrison is the author of "Sell Like You Mean It!" and the president of SalesForce Solutions, a Kansas City-based sales training and development company. Learn more at www.SalesForceSolutions.net.