

## When customers



by **Connie Brubaker**

In a perfect world, customers calling to complain would never raise their voices, would never get angry, would never say things that would make a sailor blush.



### Connie's Comments

Actually, in a perfect world, customers would never call to complain at all — because they would never have any complaints.

But the reality is that no matter how good your service, sooner or later someone is going to complain about something. And that is your time to shine.

The art of delivering exceptional customer satisfaction really lies not in preventing complaints, but in addressing them. Help solve a customer's problem, make them feel like you value and care about them, and you may well win a lifelong customer — one who will brag about your company to friends, family and co-workers. A Warwick Business School study found that 53 percent of outstanding customer service examples resulted from well-handled complaints.

On the flip side, if you're dismissive, patronizing or rude . . . well, studies show we tend to tell more people about *negative* experiences than positive ones. So be warned — how you

## Call center tips for dealing with difficult situations

handle customer complaints can create a major ripple effect, for good or bad.

Because we live in a world pressed for time, 73 percent of customers say their preferred method of resolving a problem is by phone. As a result, call centers (outsourced and internal) have become increasingly popular. Several of my clients, including a telephone company, software company and legal services office, use call centers to handle complaints.

Whether you outsource your call center or handle it internally, here are a few keys for turning customer problems into business opportunities:

**1. Keep it simple.** A complaint process that's difficult to access will

only increase your customer's frustration level. They want to resolve their problem as quickly as possible. The sooner they talk to a person who can actually help, the better. The last thing an irate customer wants to hear is, "Please hold . . ."

**2. Use active listening.** Listen patiently, without interrupting, until the customer has finished. Then summarize

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## Help your customers with active listening

Listening shouldn't be passive. For it to be a true customer service tool, it must be an interactive experience.

When you listen to customers, make sure you're really hearing what they're saying. Don't make assumptions. Don't jump ahead. Don't impose your own filters on the situation.

Instead, ask questions. Summarize their argument. Make sure you understand what's really at the root of the problem — it may not be what you think.

Become proficient at active listening and you'll have discovered a powerful customer service tool. Here are just a few benefits:

1. It helps you find out what your customer wants or needs.
2. It can help prevent misunderstandings and errors.
3. It provides clues about how to improve your services or products.
4. It builds long-term, loyal customer relationships.



## In this issue of SOLUTIONS:

- Using call centers to win over difficult customers
- Benefits of active listening
- Why we don't listen better

## Barriers to Effective Listening

- Noise
- Interruptions
- Daydreaming
- Technology
- Stereotypes
- Trigger words and phrases
- Attitude

**NEED A SPEAKER?** *Connie Brubaker is a certified Integrity Systems® business consultant and professional speaker who focuses on sales, customer service and leadership. Her speeches include **Leadership Matters: Motivating Your Employees to Success**; **The Emotional Side of Selling: Discovering What's Holding You Back**; **The Magnolia: a Southern Woman Shares Her Struggles and Triumphs**; and **Turn Storytelling into Storyselling: Using Stories to Make a Connection**.*

## QUOTE OF THE MONTH

*"It's not the tigers and bears that chase customers away. What bug customers the most are the mosquitoes and gnats — the little things."*

— Unknown

## Customer complaints offer service opportunities

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rize their complaint, asking "Did I get that right?" Ask questions and really listen to the answers.

**3. Empathize, even if you don't agree.** Your customers aren't your enemy — don't treat them as though they are. Show them that you understand and want to help. Don't become defensive — that will only raise the temperature of the call. Avoid "stock" responses like "I'm sorry, that's against company policy." Instead, use neutral statements like "I can see that you're upset," or "I don't blame you for being angry."

**4. Don't make it personal.** If a customer becomes verbally abusive, don't rise to the bait. Instead, say something like, "Have I personally offended you?

If I have, I'd like to apologize." This may jolt the caller into calming down and refocusing on the real problem.

**5. Help them help you solve the problem.** Again, avoid an antagonistic relationship in favor of a team approach. Ask, "What exactly can we do to make this situation right?" Or suggest a solution and ask their opinion.

As frustrating as handling caller complaints can be, it's really a treasure chest of customer service possibilities. If you can show callers that you understand their complaint and that you're ready to go above and beyond to resolve it, odds are good that they'll emerge from the experience more loyal customers than they were before!

How's that for customer service?