

Customer Complaints – The Friend No Business Wants!

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Receiving a complaint from a customer is one of the least rewarding aspects of being in business, after all, as a small business owner, you've invested a great deal of blood, sweat and tears into your business only to have it attacked by this person who clearly doesn't care about the effort you've put in. For many small business owners; that makes it personal and personal attacks hurt! While it is quite understandable for business owners to take complaints personally it's important to take stock of the complaint and examine it objectively, reacting emotionally is neither helpful to your customer, your stress level nor to your business.

'The old adage that the customer is always right is simply wrong', customers often get it wrong, however, regardless of the accuracy of their complaint they are **valuable**, treat them as such, do you want them to continue spending money in your business or would you rather they go away and tell someone who cares? The fact is you should care:

1. **Listen** to their complaint actively, seriously and calmly; check back with them from time to time to make sure you're getting the facts straight. Show you are interested by taking notes and read them back. Try not to react to what is being said, just check you know exactly what the customer is saying.
2. **Reassure** the customer that you take their complaint seriously and you will investigate it thoroughly.
3. **Apologize** about the situation the customer finds themselves in, but be careful not to rush to judgement quickly, especially about an employee's perceived conduct and never denigrate an employee to the customer. There is nothing worse for the morale of a business' employees than feeling they don't have the support of the boss and you can be sure these days any denigrating comments you make will become public relatively quickly.
4. **Investigate** the complaint fully and quickly, ensure you take notes and address each of the concerns raised by the customer. If the conduct of an employee is at issue, ensure that employee is invited to contribute, like a small business owner; employees can take complaints very personally, encourage them not to react emotionally and let them know they have your full support. If an employee has made a mistake for whatever reason, explain that everyone makes mistakes (even business owners) but it is important what we do about those mistakes. This will allow an employee to take responsibility for their conduct without threatening their job security. If an employees' conduct is repeated or threatening, clearly, it's in the best interest of the business to ensure codes of conduct are adhered to and a more formal response is required from the business owner, however, jumping straight to this stage can be very counterproductive for all concerned.
5. **Contact** the customer with the outcome of your investigation and what you intend to do about it, if an apology is required... give it, if replacement products are requiredreplace them, if any explanation is required ... then explain, if no explanation is available ... be honest and say so.
6. **Offer** inducements for the customer to continue doing business with you, saying a customer is valuable - but not demonstrating it, sends an inconsistent message. Be very careful of naff, rehearsed and disingenuous rhetoric. Have you ever sat on the phone to a telco listening to that repeated message, "your call is important to us so please stay on the line..." while you wait thirty minutes. Clearly; if your call was truly important to them you wouldn't have to wait so long! Be sure you don't give the same type of response.

7. **Ask** if there is anything else you can help them with, this allows the customer the opportunity to air any further grievances.

Social media and complaints:

Customer complaints can be like water around the hull of a boat, if there are any holes in the boat the water will find its way in. If there are any holes in your complaints policy, the complaint will find its way in to the public arena and the most common way is through social media. There has been a rush to social media marketing by small businesses, while it can be a valuable tool, it can also be a damaging one. A single complainer can have a serious effect on a business's reputation. While a business may have a hundred endorsements, one single complaint will be what is remembered more often by potential customers. Keeping customers satisfied and off social media as a complaints medium is of paramount importance. As a marketing consultant; I counsel my clients to ensure their complaints protocols and policies are in place and well understood before embarking on a social media site.

If a negative comment does arise you should publicly respond by offering the complainant, the opportunity to come in and discuss the matter. This will demonstrate to everyone looking at your site that you will respond to complaints, don't ignore the comments, at best they will stay there for other potential customers to see, at worst they will grow like a cancer.

Complaints aren't all bad news:

Complaints are a very important source of business intelligence, while they are often skewed in terms of what people really think of your business, the fact is a happy customer seldom feeds back their good feelings about a product or service. Complaints do provide avenues to analyse potential issues in your business, in the same way road accident data is used to determine future road upgrades. If a problem continues to repeatedly present itself, you must find a way to remove or mitigate that problem. Some companies try to remove all potential problems; however, this can be time consuming and unnecessary, especially if a complaint has happened once and is unlikely to occur again. The exception to this is obviously workplace safety, where one accident is too many, in this case all issues must be dealt with in accordance with legislation. For complaints to become useful as business intelligence, accurate records must be kept, there are various marketing CRM (Customer Relationship Management) software packages available that can assist with this task. It's also important that as small a number of people as possible are dealing with complaints (preferably one) this allows consistency of response and importantly the complaints intelligence to be centred in a small area. The staff members taking complaints needs to constantly feed-back complaints data to the business owner, so they can make well informed strategic decisions. One of the most common uses of complaints data by marketers is in a SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threats) analysis; where complaints inform the business's weakness and potential threats. This makes complaints data invaluable, so while you may not want to thank a customer complaining, the reality is, you should genuinely thank them for providing you with information that could potentially save your business.