



Steps to Success with Angry Customers

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You pick up the phone and a customer says, **YOU PEOPLE!** All of your senses jump to attention as you wonder: *Why couldn't I get through a single day without one of these calls?* Phone rage, like other rages in the news, is on the rise.

We know the old saying is true: **The surest sign you haven't got any sense is to argue with someone who hasn't.** However, when you must resolve a problem, how can you reason with an angry person, when they're frustrated, confused and pushing you to give in to their demands?

The answer is: You prepare! The callers may be different, their words will vary, but the issues and challenges they present will be quite similar.

Selma Myers said, *When issues are resolved in such a way that there are winners and losers, the stage is set for the next round of conflict.* You don't have time for future conflicts about this issue. You're a winner only when the issues are resolved.

Try the structured communication process outlined in this article. You will be better prepared for either calls or face-to-face encounters with angry individuals. This script is designed to create more positive, happy endings with angry people. Use your own words; just be sure to keep the approach and sequence the same.

Step 1:

Silently hold your ground and focus on the issues you detect in what you're hearing. Step back emotionally to avoid the drain that comes from personalizing such an encounter. You don't need to emotionally connect to deal with an angry customer. This doesn't mean you don't care about getting the issues resolved. It just means you'll handle the situation from a safe emotional distance.

I describe this process as having an **out-of-body** experience. This helps my clients to visualize the thinking process that helps them to be available whereby they focus on issues.

Remind yourself that the negative behavior *belongs to* the other person. Don't let it stick to you. Interrupt—only if ABSOLUTELY necessary. If you interrupt the flow of words (especially on the telephone) the customer will start over at the very beginning.

If the caller uses obscene language, you'll probably want to introduce them to your friend, **Mr. Dial Tone**. You should NOT be required to tolerate verbal abuse by callers. In a slow, deliberate tone of voice, you can say ***I will help you, that won't be a problem for me, but I will not tolerate disrespectful language.***

Move your focus from the person and their behavior, to finding common ground anywhere possible.

Step 2:

Acknowledge and validate their feelings, while reducing the intensity with a calming, but deliberate, grown-up, professional tone of voice.

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***I can see that you're upset and I'm here to help you.
I want to assure you that we will find a solution for you.***

Don't promise more than you can offer. Do offer as much assurance as you can at this point.

Most customer service reps are taught at this step to say *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry* to calm the angry person. This can help, but only to a limited degree. In addition, there are several problems with this approach. It sounds empty and insincere.

This is unnecessary when what the customer really wants is the sincere promise that you will help them. It puts you in what I call a one-step down position, which means you're at a disadvantage in dealing with the customer. I believe this ***I'm sorry*** approach has helped encourage more demanding customers and reduce their respect for customer service reps.

It's much more effective to first validate the customer's feelings, and then continue with Steps 2 and 3.

By the way, *sorry* means *miserable, worthless* or *poor*.

Of course you'll still say *I'm sorry* in casual conversation with friends or when you want to convey sympathy for someone's loss or problem.

Step 3:

Empathize, while stating the situation as you have heard it.

I would be frustrated, too. This can be confusing. So you would like for me to.....? Is that right?

This is something that we can take care of fairly easily.

I can help with this. There are a couple of things I should clarify for you.

Step 4:

Thank the person for bringing this to your attention. This should always precede any apology.

Thank you for taking the time to call about this.

Thank you so much for making me aware that this happened.

Thank you for bringing this to our attention.

Step 5:

Apologize, only if there has been a mistake and only for the specific problem.

I apologize for...

No over-apologizing! No ***I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!***

In steps 2 through 5 you *disarm* the angry person, show that you understand where they are coming from, and establish that you are working in partnership with them to give them options and to ultimately find a solution.

Step 6:

Collect information in a positive, professional, upbeat way. Use ***Positive Power***[™] Lines. Offer options as you see them. Put the ***CANs*** in front of the ***CAN'Ts***. Let them know what is possible, before you go into what can't be done. You must remain flexible at this step. Use your creativity and knowledge to anticipate what they may bring up. Stay one step ahead of them.

Realize that they are demanding the ONE thing they can identify as a solution. You can either offer other possibilities. Or, if you must deliver bad news, end their false expectations in a supportive, polite, matter-of-fact way.

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Step 7:

Follow up in cases where this is necessary to confirm that the other individual is satisfied with the outcome. Some of you have heard me say, "Don't let people live in your head rent free." That means, don't get mad at them and don't feel hurt by them. Imagine looking at this person through a straw. That's about all you're able to see in these moments, so no matter how they're behaving, remember, you're probably seeing their worst at that moment.

Of course, it's inappropriate, it's unfair and it's not going to help them get their problem solved, but you don't want to get caught up thinking or worrying about all that. As long as you're doing what you're supposed to be, however they behave is not about you. Emotionally disconnect. N-TIP -- Never Take It Personally.

Keep the communication going between your organization and customers, and between you and your co-workers. By touching them in a positive way, you begin a magical domino effect that can impact many others, in ways you may never know.

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