

The difficult customer

Are they customers from hell or are we putting them through hell?

By Pamela Schuck

Every business has customers from hell. If you were really honest, you might admit that you or your company is someone else's customer from hell. I know I can be.

When you are the difficult customer, ask yourself, "Why am I being this way? What caused me to be so aggravated?"

Sometimes it has absolutely nothing to do with the business the hellish behavior is directed toward. Some reasons are particular to the individual and what is going on with his or her personal or business situation and you just become the target.

You might be upset about something else and carry that anger into a situation with you, or you are overtired, stressed and frustrated. These things are beyond the service providers' control — but you should always be empathetic and understanding.

But what about the ones who turn into the customers from hell because your business has put them through hell and now they are fighting back?

Why do your customers get upset?

■ You or someone in the organization promised something that was not delivered.

It is important to look at the reliability factor of service and understand what promises we are making. Someone was supposed to get back to the customer and didn't; promised delivery by a certain date and didn't deliver; promised action and didn't follow through. Customers get upset if you don't keep your promises, and if it happens often or with a critical need, the customer turns into a difficult person.

■ You or someone in the organization was indifferent, rude or discourteous.

Many times, rudeness is unintentional. We try to make light or funny statements that come across as rude. Treat every customer as you would a special family member.

When your customers are doing business with you, their expectation is that

you will know the value of a customer to your business. Being responsive is critical to your customers' expectations.

■ They feel someone has conveyed an unpleasant attitude toward them.

Perhaps the customer was surly or treated you poorly. That is no excuse for you to react unprofessionally. Every customer deserves to be

treated with a positive attitude that reflects that you know the importance of customers. A bad attitude sends customers into that defensive mode of lashing out.

■ They feel they weren't listened to.

People want to be listened to. Don't interrupt. Often, customers from hell start out honestly trying to resolve a problem or concern. But when they express their concerns and feel no one listened, it puts them in the place of, "You'd better listen to me!"

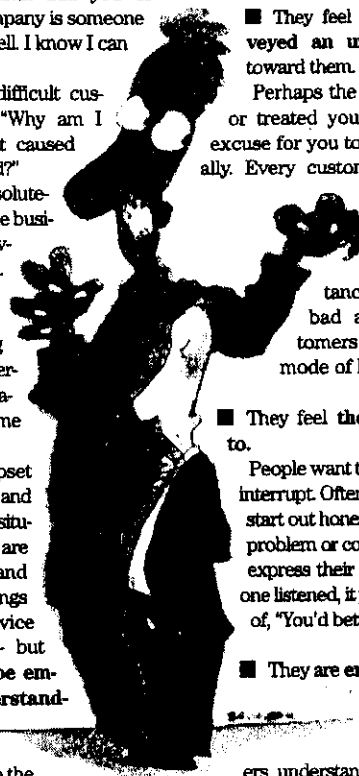
■ They are embarrassed at doing something incorrectly.

Make sure customers understand what they need to know before they try to use your product or service. Go over procedures about returns, questions and guarantees so there will be fewer misunderstandings. Teach your customers with caring. Don't ever imply the customer was not smart enough.

■ Their integrity or honesty was questioned.

Treat customers with respect and dignity. Assume your business has made the mistake until shown otherwise. Don't assume the customer is wrong. We know our business so well, we assume it must be the customer who made the mistake.

Work to eliminate body language, voice tones and facial expressions that convey distrust. Avoid projecting an "us vs. them" attitude about customers. And, never threaten a customer.



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