

Customer Complaint Handling Training

Innovative Complaint and Abusive Customer Handling

Demanding, aggressive and abusive customers are increasingly causing concern to customer service professionals. This increase is no doubt being fuelled by a whole series of issues, including the host of TV and media items promoting consumer rights. Even Kids Saturday morning TV has a slot in this vein!

Instructions from management to “**terminate abusive calls**” can be little more than abdication, as staff may feel disempowered and the callers rage increases and is delivered to the next team member in the form of another similar or worse situation.

It is important staff, are given tangible support to help them in telephone and face-to-face situations. This issue is here to stay, in fact according to all the research, it's on the increase.

To understand the impact of **great customer management** cannot be underestimated. To make a **great start** to a conversation, can in itself prevent a customer being abusive. Within the first few seconds of the call or meeting the customer realises that the organisation is keen to resolve their burning issue. **Great conversational techniques, holds, transfers and body language** all play their part in building confidence in any, not just potentially abusive situations.

So, what if great customer management alone doesn't work? Well if it's a telephone call, have an opening message announcing calls may be, or are recorded for training/security purposes. This will certainly have an impact in reducing initial aggression and should be seriously considered.

Anyway, **what's all the fuss?** We hear abusive language all the time! The language in question is likely to be one of two/three words used, mostly about the situation or the organisation. On occasions these “words” are also directed (it appears) towards the staff member.

The words in question are, many people regret, commonplace in today's conversations. The “**F**” **word was decriminalised a while ago**, as the High Court created a new piece of case law deeming this an everyday word.

So, where does that leave us? Well, it is the way we individually receive and interpret this behaviour, which should be the first focus of attention.

The origins of these behaviours, makes for fascinating and practical learning.

Customer Complaint Handling Training

Transactional Analysis

The psychological model “**Transactional Analysis**” provides a simple mechanism to help staff understand the caller’s behaviour and just as importantly, their own reactions and feelings. This new insight allows staff to become “detached” from the emotions and allows them to manage the issues and positively manage the behaviours of the customer and themselves.

- A. **Parent ego state:** rules, regulations, “must do’s”, threats
- B. **Adult ego state:** calm, logical, thinks things through
- C. **Child ego state:** emotional, irrational, name calling, swearing

~ Eric Berne, *Games People Play* ~

Abusive customer management can be approached from three dimensions. Staff can react to a really tough conversation in the following ways:

- 1) **Deal with the behaviour**
- 2) **Deal with the issue**
- 3) **Deal with behaviour and the issue**

Dealing with the behaviour

This is a no-nonsense technique, whereby the customer is told that the behaviour is not acceptable (usually the language) continues.

E.g.: “I’m not prepared to listen to this...” or “I will terminate the call if you continue to use that language...”

Benefits: Leaves the customer in no doubt, is an unambiguous instruction to staff

Downsides: The customer may well call back or get even more irate. The staff member can feel disempowered (they may feel they could have handled it without much difficulty).

Customer Complaint Handling Training

Dealing with the issue

This approach focuses energies towards dealing with the issues, it ignores the negative behaviours

E.g.: “How can I help...” or “Would you like me to see if I can help...”

Benefits: Can surprise the customer as they are expecting a battle about their behaviour. (This may be the desire in itself!). It has potential to sort the problem out. This option can be hugely satisfying for staff and reduces the need for escalation to a boss.

Downsides: It may appear that the organisation tolerates abusive behaviour. Staff may feel exposed (particularly sensitive staff members)

Dealing with the behaviour and the issue.

We don't see too many downsides with this option, especially if this is done skilfully. For example, if someone is being abusive to you, you would typically say, **“I can tell you are very upset about this, I would like to help, please tell me what the problem is”**

This method achieves a number of things:

- a. you are acknowledging their frustration
- b. you are not specifically pointing out the demanding behaviour (i.e. swearing)
- c. you are moving the conversation on (i.e. asking them to explain the issue)
- d. you are re-assuring them that you can help and want to help

Responding under pressure

One main problem staff face is that when under the pressures of a really tough conversation **their logic thinking mechanism can desert them.**

It's a medical fact, that when we perceive ourselves to be “under attack”, our brain functions focus upon “fight or flight” objectives, leaving us exposed when asked to perform a simple task (think of the exam questions, the driving test, the simple question

Customer Complaint Handling Training

on a TV game show!). It is therefore vital staff are able to develop useful “sound-bites” **(See examples above, (Options 1,2 and 3) and think about which “soundbites are most likely to work for you and best reflect your organisations values!)** to utilise in such eventualities. Teams, who examine experiences, compare these with the Psychological model and rework appropriate “adult” responses.

~ Martin Gilhooly ~