



Are you ready to manage the difficult call?

Everyone in customer service is bound to get some difficult calls occasionally — whether they are because of a miscommunication, a service failure, an unwarranted customer expectation, or some unspoken personal issue that contributes to a customer's unsettled emotional state. As a result, customers can sometimes express disappointment, anger, and even become abusive.

These types of difficult calls don't happen often, but they happen, and they take up a lot of the rep's energy and focus, so you should be prepared to deal with them.

In fact, as Charlotte Purvis of Purvis Communications, puts it, "How we manage these calls can be a real test of our skills and our approach to customer service."

Purvis suggests that reps look at difficult calls as opportunities to stretch their skills and turn these situations around in a way that creates loyal, long-term customers. And for customer service organizations, she says, "It's an opportunity for us to find the gaps in our service delivery."

Taking a difficult call

Difficult calls can come in all sizes and shapes. But whatever the issue or problem, Purvis says, "It is important for customer service reps to remember that every single customer deserves the very best service we can provide — without exception."

With that first step in mind, "reps should then immediately put themselves into the listening/learner mode, say, 'thank you for telling us about that,' and start asking questions to clarify the situation. If we can ask probing questions and really hear what the customer is saying to us, that's the best way to start helping," Purvis says.

It's also important, whatever we say, to use what is called "clean language." And by this she means generally using the same words and phrases that the customer uses, but without repeating any of the customer's emotional or highly-charged language. For example, if a customer says, "I am extremely disappointed that my product did not arrive on time," the rep might respond, "We regret that the product did not arrive on time and the inconvenience you experienced."

The rep avoids the word "disappointed." The goal, Purvis says, is to try to capture and neutralize any of the caller's "trigger words," or words that obviously carry some emotional baggage.

Turning the call around

Once you have heard the caller's complaint, and repeated the issue back to the caller in "clean language" as a way to neutralize the situation, you can then begin to move things forward by offering an apology. But, says Purvis, "We apologize on behalf of the organization. We try as much as possible not to make the issue personal — particularly because, as a rep, you are not responsible for the product not arriving on time."

Say something like "We apologize" or "We regret the inconvenience," but then move on as quickly as possible to the next step — what you can do to fix the situation. Say something like, "We regret that the situation occurred, but I am so glad you called us, so that we have an opportunity to fix that situation for you."

Closing the difficult call

Once you have offered an apology and stated the actions that will be taken to resolve the issue, there are two additional things that reps should do.

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First is to “recap the entire conversation,” says Purvis. “Tell the caller, ‘You called about such and such, and again, we regret any inconvenience. And here is what we are going to do to help resolve the situation.’”

From there, if your organization allows it, you can take the further step of giving the customer your name and contact information. “Tell the customer they are free to call back and talk to any customer service representative,” Purvis says, “but make sure that they know your name. That’s like putting your signature on the resolution to this problem.”

In addition, Purvis says, “Give the customer the opportunity to have the last word. Say something like, ‘Do you have any further questions about the product or the delivery?’ or ‘Are these shipping arrangements satisfactory to you?’”

Things to avoid on a difficult call

The first thing that customer service reps need to avoid when managing a difficult call, Purvis says, is taking the call personally. “Remember that ‘you’ are a representative — and when a customer

Dealing with the abusive caller

According to customer communications consultant Charlotte Purvis, customer service reps should have the same goal on difficult calls as they have with every call — to provide the best possible service. And that includes callers who become angry or abusive.

In fact, rather than call them “abusive callers,” Purvis prefers to refer to such customers as “callers who use abusive or inappropriate language — so we are focusing on the behavior, and not on the person.”

That’s not to say you have to take the abuse, however. “What you might say is something like this: ‘We are not allowed to participate in calls where abusive or inappropriate language is being used,’” says Purvis. “That way, you state the position of your organization, but you are very careful not to reprimand the caller.”

On the other hand, she says, “Don’t say, ‘You just used a profanity with me, and I don’t appreciate that.’ Again, we don’t try to reprimand the caller, we simply state our position, and in those rare situations where the language continues, we escalate or terminate the call.”

Reps can also ask their managers for a meeting with input from the legal department and HR on the manner and language they should use to terminate such a call on behalf of their organization.

says ‘you’ during a difficult call, they are not talking about you but about the organization.

In conjunction with that, it’s also important not to become critical with the person who is calling. “As much as possible, we should not criticize, reprimand, or use cynicism with a customer,” Purvis says.

In fact, she adds, “we don’t want to suggest — either verbally or through our non-verbal behaviors — that this caller is a bother. Our job is to manage every call by doing our best to deliver excellent customer service.”

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