Building Your Resilience To Handle Difficult Clients

In turbulent times, the need to build resilience in handling difficult customers is greater than ever. How you choose to handle those customers can make all the difference between creating a satisfied customer versus the scenario in which the customer walks away angry or upset. While you cannot control another person's attitude or behaviours, it is important to remember that you can control your own. How you approach the challenge of serving difficult customers can make all the difference in your own attitude and perspective.

When service breaks down for a customer, he or she deals with frustration and dissatisfaction in a variety of ways. Often, employees are in the firing line of his or her anger or irritation. Customers come to us angry for a variety of reasons, many of which we cannot affect. There are effective strategies we can use to help manage the situation. Let us examine different types of difficult customers and learn what kinds of tactics are most effective for diffusing their frustrations and negative behaviours.

The hostile-aggressive customer

The most intimidating type of customer to deal with is the one who yells or screams at employees. I call this type of person the hostile-aggressive customer and engaging this person can be quite uncomfortable for an employee as the following story illustrates.

When Mayl arrived at the company office one morning, the day had started off quite well. The kids had gotten up on time, no one missed the bus, and the drive to work was smooth and trouble-free. May recently had started in the customer service department and enjoyed her work. She spoke with a variety of customers on the phone every day, and kept learning new aspects of his job as she solved their problems and answered their questions. However, today would be different.

Sam was a recent transferee into town and company had moved his family's household goods into their new home last week. Now, at 9.35am on a Monday morning, Sam had done a bone to pick with organization – May was right in his line of fire. As she adjusted his headset, the incoming call button on her phone flashed and May punched the button to get the day started. She had barely greeted the caller when an angry voice boomed into his earphones. "What in the world is wrong with you people!" Sam screamed. "Are all of you as incompetent as those idiots who moved our stuff in last week?"
May gulped and took a deep breath. “Sir, I'm sorry. What seems to have been the concern?” For the next five minutes, May endured an expletive-filled rant from Sam. May was so uncomfortable and taken aback that she could barely get a word in edgewise - and when she did, all he could get out was apologies, which seemed to make Sam even madder. May was finally able to get Sam's name, pull up his record in the computer, and ask a few questions. It turned out the movers had broken a box of the Sam family's good china, and while that was bad enough, it was the lack of remorse displayed by the movers that really had raised the family's collective blood pressure.

The outburst of anger threw May for a loop, and he could not seem to get back control of the conversation. Sam’s threats to report the service lapse to his corporate relocation department sent chills down May's back. She knew it was important to satisfy Sam so the company did not receive a negative review from the corporate client - but she could not get Sam to slow down enough to listen to her options. When Sam ultimately slammed down the phone in May's ear, all the pleasure had drained out of May's day and her stomach was in knots. Suddenly, the prospect of spending several years with the organization seemed far less appealing than it had at the beginning of the day. She was emotionally drained and unsure where to turn to learn how to handle the next Sam more effectively.

Hostile-aggressive customers are experts at taking their hurt and disappointment out on others. They seem unable to manage their anger and frustration internally and instead, use other people as human punching bags. They usually stick to verbal assaults but occasionally, will resort to physical threats like pounding on the table or pointing a finger in someone’s face. Few employees look forward to dealing with them.

In their anger, hostile-aggressive customers often fail to listen and may make threats to "report you to authorities" or "take my business somewhere else". They often lose sight of their goal - which is to solve a problem. Dealing with them is emotionally and physically draining. Increasingly, after letting off steam, hostile-aggressive customers often calm down and even feel guilty or embarrassed about their behaviour.

When it comes to coping strategies, the goal when dealing with hostile-aggressive customers is to try and defuse their anger while moving toward problem-solving. At no point should you let the customer physically threaten you. Every business needs contingency plans for responding to physical aggression by customers, no matter how uncomfortable it might seem in the planning process. Thankfully, the vast majority of hostile-aggressive customers do not resort to physical violence but they still can make employees very uncomfortable with their attitude, behaviour and language.
Some strategies for defusing their anger include:

* Do not take their anger personally. Remaining calm and unemotional will help de-escalate the conflict.

* Know your own limits. Some people are not bothered by cursing and expletives - others find that behaviour unacceptable. Know where you draw the line and be willing to hang up or walk away from the customer at that point. While we like to think that "the customer is always right", it does not mean the customer has the right to curse and swear at you.

* Let the customer know you have reached your limits by saying something to the effect of, "Mr Sam Tan, I'd very much like to help you. I can't solve your problem if you're going to swear at me." If that does not stop the cursing (or other hostile behaviour), you can say something such as, "I'm going to have to terminate this call if your swearing doesn't stop. You're welcome to call us back after you have calmed down."

* Keep your voice and gestures neutral. If you let yourself become angry or emotional, that will prolong the situation. Your calmness can help defuse the customer's anger.

* Sometimes, hostile-aggressive customers just want to blow off steam. If you do not feel threatened by their behaviour, actively listening to them can help. Ask questions to help them give you the details. It is a similar approach to dealing with angry children or lancing an infected wound. By "letting it out", you help them let go of their immediate anger.

* Focus on facts, not emotion. Work to uncover the facts of the situation and take notes. This helps you avoid asking them to repeat what already has been said - something bound to raise the blood pressure of the hostile-aggressive customer.

* Use empathy in measured amounts. "I understand that you are upset because of the ...."

* Let them know you want to solve their issues promptly and accurately, and ask for their cooperation. "Mr Sam Tan, I'm going to get to the bottom of this situation - May you please help me do that by telling me what steps you've already taken to resolve this issue?"
* Tone of voice and attitude are everything. If you do not care or you think the customer is "blowing things out of proportion", that will come across in your conversation with the customer. What you say often matters less than how you say it.

* If you do in fact feel physically threatened or in danger, call someone in security or with the authority to help you. There is no reason you should put up with feeling helpless or in jeopardy.

Managers need to ensure that policies and procedures are in place that provide employees with the support and security they need to do their jobs effectively. Please be aware that different people have different levels of sensitivity; take time to find out your employees' comfort levels and what they need to feel safe and secure in order to do their best work for you. Hostile-aggressive customers can be very intimidating for employees to handle. Your ultimate goal is to try and solve their problems while not taking their anger personally. Developing the skill needed to move the conversation in a productive direction takes time and effort but the emotional payoff is worth the effort.

**The Insistent Customer**

As we move down the intensity scale in customer interactions, we encounter the insistent customer. This person is not shouting or ranting but their behaviour is annoying nonetheless. Insistent customers know just enough so that they think they know it all. They sound authoritative or "in the know" but often have little real experience with the topic at hand. They may use limited experience or one specific incident from which to generalise. They often have strong opinions and do not hesitate to challenge your credibility or facts as the following story illustrates.

With more than seven years of experience in real estate, Carol had grown accustomed to dealing with many types of clients. Generally, she enjoyed meeting new people and found it rewarding to help them find the right homes for their needs. Her latest transaction really was giving her fits. Greg and Sharon were looking for a four-bedroom home after being transferred into town. As transferees from a smaller city, they still were adjusting to the prices in the "big city". Consequently, nothing seemed right to them. They wanted to purchase a home in a good school district but seemed almost offended by the home prices found there. Every time they went to tour a home, Sharon insisted the price was too high and would quote her father's apparent favourite saying, "It's better to have money and not need it than to need it and not have it." Even though they only had been working together for a week, Carol thought she would scream if she heard that quote one more time. It was clear that her father was a big influence on Sharon. However, he lived in another small community and seemed unfamiliar with either the local prices or the housing styles. Carol needed to help Sharon and Greg adjust their perspective and focus on a solution to their housing needs.
Insistent customers can be swayed by facts and logic. While they may appear confident and commanding, they often are relying on vague experiences or single sources of information.

**Some ways to communicate effectively with them include:**

* Do not take their concerns or scepticism personally. Your job is to move the conversation forward toward an effective resolution of their problems or concerns.

* Stay focused on the specific problem. Carol might say, "I understand you are concerned with the prices here in the community so let us take a look at the recent data to see the price range of homes that have sold recently. That will give us a benchmark on realistic pricing for this neighbourhood."

* Focus on their desired outcome. "The price you'd like to pay is closer to what three bedroom homes are going for in this neighbourhood. Would you like to look at those homes?"

* Ask them specific, closed-ended questions to uncover the source of their frustrations and the facts they are using to form their opinions.

* Probe for their deeper objectives. Ask them to play out an ideal situation in their mind - once you know their objective, you can develop specific answers to their concerns.

* Stick to facts. Use recognised authorities, published facts or specific data to make your case.

* Do not tell the insistent customer he or she is wrong or argue with them. This will serve only to make them more insistent - or angry. A variation of "You know, that would appear to be true and others have felt that way ..." can be used.

Your goal with the insistent customer is to help them move forward into problem resolution rather than to continue to spin the same information over and over again. Stick to the facts and stay objective.
The Negative Customer

The next type of person you might encounter is the negative customer. These people seem to be dissatisfied with everything and in fact, often see themselves as victims of circumstances. They often will shoot down every suggestion you make, making thorough use of the word "but". It is frustrating dealing with these types of customers but do not let their negativity get you down. As already noted, stay objective and do not take their attitude personally. You cannot fix their worldview but you can overcome their objections and arrive at a satisfactory solution as the following hypothetical situation is intended to illustrate.

Elaine's new position with the relocation company apparently had come with a high price tag. As a relocation manager, she had taken on a new set of responsibilities - including client coordination. That was not bad in itself but she now had to communicate directly with Mike in the corporate relocation department and he was never satisfied. In fact, no one in the relocation company even liked talking to him. It was a draining experience every time she put in a call to Mike.

Mike had an unpleasant tone to his voice and every conversation seemed to consist of focusing on what was wrong or what had not worked with the latest corporate move Elaine had coordinated. Even when Elaine received kudos from the transferee, it still did not satisfy Mike. He would sniff and say, "Well, that's not what I heard." He shot down every idea or improvement Elaine would propose - and now she was unsure what to do next. She felt hesitant during their conversations, unable to take the lead or steer the conversation in a more positive direction. It had gotten to the point where Elaine hated to pick up the phone to call, afraid Mike's voice might be on the other end.

Mike's negative attitude is paralysing Elaine. In order to work effectively with this negative customer, she can try some of the following ideas:

* **It is not personal.** The negative customer is likely to be negative no matter with whom he or she is talking to. This customer has a pessimistic orientation to the world around him or her and it is one you are unlikely to change.

* Questioning skills are very useful in dealing with all difficult customers - and negatives are no exception. Use detailed questions to pin down their objections or concerns. "Could you please list the problems that your transferee experienced during the move-in last week? I'd like to understand the specific concerns you have."
* Practise active listening skills and paraphrasing. Elaine can say, "Mike, if I understand your concerns correctly, you are troubled by the time it's taking to move transferees into their new homes. Do I understand you correctly?" This helps Elaine take a little more control of the conversation and Mike has less room to manoeuvre.

* Keep your focus on action and problem-solving. "Mike, we're going to implement a moving hotline so transferees can call with any problems the day of the move. I think that will help alleviate some of your concerns."

* Get the negative customer involved in solving the problem and in creating a desired outcome. By asking Mike to list the solutions he wants implemented, Elaine again has more control over the conversation. She can zoom in on those ideas that either parallel her own or find good ideas she has not yet thought of. She can offer to partner with him to implement a solution.

Dealing with negative customers can be emotionally draining. **Staying neutral and focusing on a positive outcome** can help reduce the frustration for employees who need to work effectively with this type of customer.

**The Passive-Aggressive Customer**

As we move down the intensity scale, we come to the passive-aggressive customer. With this type of difficult customer, you have the opposite experience from dealing with the hostile-aggressive person - not only do you not hear him or her complaining, you often do not even know there is a problem until it is too late.

Passive-aggressive customers like to avoid open conflict so they often hide or bury their dissatisfaction behind a placid appearance. This is potentially dangerous to your customer loyalty efforts because they often will tell friends or family about a bad experience but never say a word about it to your company. Passive-aggressive customers often take this approach to avoid feeling vulnerable or risk making someone else uncomfortable. Unfortunately, if you do not know they are unhappy, you cannot take any steps to resolve their concerns as the following story shows.

Thomas was running out of patience. He had two estimating appointments that afternoon and he was at least 20 minutes behind schedule. Catherine was proving to be as frustrating in cyberspace as she was in person. He had been to her house last week to draw up a moving estimate for her upcoming relocation, and he thought the appointment had gone well. Truth be told, she was rather quiet and as the appointment
went on, he noticed that she responded to his statements with a couple of sarcastic comments. "Don't mind me ... you just go ahead with your paperwork" and "I'm sorry, am I interrupting your train of thought?" were nothing new - he had heard similar comments from other moving clients.And now, he was in front of his boss, getting chewed out over an email that Catherine had sent complaining about his attitude. She said she had hesitated to write anything but found him to be in a hurry and unconcerned with her wishes regarding several pieces of furniture.

Thomas sighed to himself. It was not like he tried to rush through his appointments. He just could not seem to get his clients to talk very much. He tried to be business-like and professional - how could that be wrong? Most of the time his appointments seemed to go well but it was frustrating to try and connect with the quiet clients. A couple of them had complained to his boss and two companies apparently had taken their moving business elsewhere. Thomas was unsure how to fix the problem.

It is a challenge for Thomas to engage his passive-aggressive customers but some of the following ideas might help:

* **Pay attention to the customer's body language and nonverbal signals.** If you sense discomfort or irritation from the customer, stop what you are saying or doing and try to understand his or her unease.

* Ask open-ended questions (questions that cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no") to uncover their concerns. Thomas could have said, "Ms Catherine Lee, I get the feeling you are uncomfortable with something I've said or done. May you tell me what your concerns might be?"

* Be comfortable with silence from customers. Do not think you have to fill in every minute with conversation. Ask and question and then wait - be willing to let the silence stretch for a bit.

* Be patient. Some passive-aggressive customers will not share their questions or concerns at first. Use a calm, open-ended approach to uncover their issues.

* If you are face-to-face with the customer, use friendly and direct eye contact to demonstrate your concern and open attitude.

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* Express your desire to be helpful and responsive. Your goal is to deliver exceptional service and you can tell them that fact.

* Sincerely encourage their feedback and comments. An open and accepting attitude goes a long way to helping passive aggressive customers feel positive about you and your company. Your desire to turn situations around or overcome previous negative experiences comes across to customers in a positive fashion.

A Difficult Challenge – Build Your Resilience

Dealing with difficult customers is a continuing challenge in any business setting. Developing additional tools and techniques for managing difficult customer behaviours will pay off with increased customer (and employee) satisfaction and decreased frustration for both customer and company. The best advice ever given to me for dealing with a difficult customer was this: "Keep your temper - and, above all, let your customer save face." In summary, ways on how a service employee can handle a difficult customer:

1. Listen and do not interrupt and argue.

2. Empathize.

3. Be knowledgeable about your field.

4. Respect the customer - Get a fresh perspective.

5. Let the customer vent.

6. Identify what the issues are.

7. Verify to the customer that you have understood the issues.

8. Focus on solutions. Tell the customers what you can do.

9. Resolve the problem and document.

10. Remember to always represent your organization in a positive way.