

Dealing with Difficult Customers

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There is much talk in business about being good to one's customers. While treating customers well is very important to a business' reputation and ultimately, the bottom line, we sometimes have customers or clients who are unreasonable or hostile.

Dealing with these customers can be difficult as we're often torn between not wanting to lose the customer and wishing they'd just go away. This has been a frequent concern among my clients. What do you do?

The preferred result would be if the customer remains a customer, but stops the unreasonable behavior. There are a few things you can look at to try to resolve the situation in the best possible way.

First, make sure the customer is truly being unreasonable. Perhaps an employee, or even you, is being difficult because you're very busy or stressed. Always look first at what the business or its employees might be doing to cause or continue the problem. Determine where the true problem lies. Put yourself (or someone you care about) in the customer's shoes. From that perspective, does the situation look different?

If you've determined that it is the customer that owns the problem, invite them to come in to your office (away from other customers and employees) and discuss the situation. Let them know that you've noticed they seem to be unhappy with your service or product and let them know you'd honestly like to solve the problem. Use the information gathered to determine where the real problem is and, if appropriate, negotiate potential solutions with the customer.

If you've determined that the customer is unreasonable and it appears that he or she will always be unreasonable, you can ask them to think about what has been discussed for a couple of days and the follow up with them to determine if they wish to continue as a customer. Whenever possible, let them make the decision.

Sometimes my clients are reluctant to spend the time talking with difficult customers who are infrequent purchasers or who haven't spent much with their organization. We must, of course, weigh time spent versus revenues; however we often make assumptions that just because a customer hasn't spent a lot with us, they never will be a high-dollar customer. This is not necessarily true. Often customers will spend a little over time to determine if they like the relationship and only when they are confident in the relationship will they spend more. This can be especially true of customers who are

anticipating a large purchase of goods or services. Be careful about asking a difficult client to do business elsewhere, or “firing” a client without having completed this due diligence.

If a customer is repeatedly being hostile or abusive with employees and the employee is doing everything they can to try to work with the customer, then you really must protect your employee by asking the customer to leave. Remember that employees are internal customers who are very important to the business as well and if they're a good employee, losing them over a hostile customer should not be an option. In some cases, businesses can be held legally liable for a customer's abuse of an employee.

A business can also look at its processes and procedures related to customers. Perhaps there is something that doesn't work well for customers. When you have a conversation with the customer, you can ask them if something isn't working for them and how they'd like to see it work. That doesn't mean that you will change everything for one customer, but if they have a valid point and potential solutions, you can check it out with other customers to determine their preferences, thereby enhancing the experience for more customers.

And finally, it's always good to ask customers with problems how they'd like to resolve the problem. If their request is reasonable and doable, then make it happen. If it isn't, let them know that you can't do that and why, then offer an alternative solution.

Be certain when you try to resolve a customer's issue that you follow through completely with the attempt. Studies have consistently shown, from a customer retention standpoint, that it's better to not try to resolve the problem than to try and fail. So make sure that anything you offer as a resolution is something that can actually be done.

Often, resolving customer issues with difficult customers can solidify the relationship with the customer and make them more loyal because someone took the time to care about them and give them personal attention, something that is becoming rare as time goes on. Remember, loyal customers are less costly than new customers, can help attract new customers, and therefore help you to steadily increase your business' bottom line.