

How to Handle Abusive Customers

by Dave Anderson

You have an irate customer on the telephone that has experienced a problem and is being abusive, profane, and demeaning to you...perhaps even uttering threats. How do you handle this situation or teach others to deal with this? If you have no plan, you're likely to react poorly and make things worse. Deal with customers long enough and you're going to get your share of those who make fools of themselves as they throw tantrums and provoke you to fight back. Defuse these situations and salvage them as customers with the following strategies.

Strategy I: Go Silent. Say nothing.

Absolute silence will surprise, and, more important, calm the angry person. Customers are often "provokers" who are looking for a word fight. Why play their game? Pause, until the person asks, "Are you still there?" At that point, if you want to have a little fun and "win the client over" instead of "winning over the client," pick out a portion of the tirade that was the most ridiculous and exaggerated. Say, "As I understand it, your major problem is _____." And then you repeat in a clear, concise manner what was just said. The odds are good that the client, with some embarrassment will confess that maybe things weren't quite that bad.

Strategy II: Professionally, but firmly draw the line:

"Mr. Prospect, when you talk to me like that, I feel I can no longer be helpful to you. If you will work with me and focus on the problem, I believe we can come up with a solution. However, if you continue to use profane and abusive language, my integrity demands that I terminate this conversation."

If the abuse continues, do as you have promised. If you are dealing with someone on the phone, allow for a "cooling off" time and then call back. Chances are excellent that he will be embarrassed by his behavior and will be much easier to work with. At this point you are in an excellent position to solve the problem or make the sale. Here's why: The prospect or customer feels that he did something *to* you; now, he should do something *for* you. That something could include an apology, a willingness to listen, and even a desire to "make it right" by buying or continuing to buy from you.

Life is too short to allow yourself to become a punching bag for customers that cross the line and verbally abuse you. But at the same time, it's vital to our long-term business interests that we should be more interested in winning the person than in winning the argument. As Abraham Lincoln once said, "The best way I know to defeat an enemy is to make him my friend."