**Step-By-Step Guide: How to Handle Customer Complaints**

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Many customers will continue doing business with you after they have been dissatisfied and complained. In fact, according to the service recovery paradox, a complaint is an opportunity that can actually result in the customer having a more positive view of your business after a complaint is resolved than before they ever had a problem.

Being able to assess and address customer complaints efficiently is key to making this happen.

**What are customer complaints, really?**

Customer complaints are often a sign that there is a disconnect between what customers expected and what your business delivered. Sometimes that disconnect is caused by a customer’s unreasonable expectations or incorrect assumptions. Other times, it is caused by something your company is doing wrong.

A customer complaint might be the result of your marketing copy leading them to believe something incorrect about your product/service — or of your user experience setting customers up for failure. Or it could reflect a problem that is happening outside of your direct control (e.g. third-party shipping issues).

The only way to find out is to give credence to customer complaints to determine if they contain genuinely useful feedback.

**A 5-step process for handling customer complaints**

To uncover the reason, you received a complaint from a customer and solve the problem of retaining that customer, use this five-step process for handling customer complaints.

**Step 1: Dig deeper by asking the right questions**

Complaints — even angry ones — can contain insights, and it’s your job to seek out the point of friction. Socratic questioning can help you get to the source of the issue.

Ask your customer questions like:

* What do you mean by…?
* Could you provide an example?
* Could you expand on that point further?

And ask yourself questions like:

* What other information do I need?
* What am I assuming here?
* Why is this complaint important?

Often, complaints are the result of problems that need to be solved. Asking the right questions helps you get to the root of the complaint, figure out if there is a way to resolve the issue and determine if the complaint contains genuinely useful feedback.

If you determine that you are not the right person to help with the customer’s complaint and need to transfer them to someone who can, make sure to explain why. This can be as simple as saying, “I’m going to set you up with our specialist who will get that squared away for you right away.”

**Step 2: Identify the type of customer you’re dealing with**

A study from the University of Florida found that when dealing with customer complaints, you may run into one of the following types of customers, each “motivated by different beliefs, attitudes, and needs”:

1. Customers who aren’t shy about letting you know they’re upset. When responding, avoid mirroring their confrontational behavior; instead, react with firm politeness.
2. Customers who pay well and demand premium support for it. When responding, avoid excuses and just get to the solution. Consider creating a VIP folder and workflow to make it easy to identify and respond to their complaints.
3. Customers who contact you frequently. Stay patient and avoid coming across as frustrated when responding to these customers. When satisfied, they often become repeat customers and advocates for your company.
4. Customers who don’t want to complain and may just take their business elsewhere without ever letting you know there was a problem. You’ll have to actively reach out to these customers to solicit and resolve their complaints; otherwise, you may never hear their feedback.

These are broad descriptions and, of course, your customers will present a more complex mixture of motivations and behaviors but being aware of different persona types can help you respond most appropriately to the real person you are assisting.

**Step 3: Respond to the customer quickly**

When it comes to unhappy customers, a speedy response goes from being a nice-to-have to a necessity. Complaints are best resolved as soon as possible.

A customer leaving a feature request won’t mind at all if it takes you a day to respond, but customers who are in a “pulling my hair out” situation want a resolution yesterday. Make responding to them a priority.

It can be useful to set up a folder that is separate from the main support queue where you can filter less-than-ecstatic messages. Here, the team can see immediately which emails are from customers who need help right away.

**Step 4: Present a solution, and verify that the problem is solved**

After you have identified the root cause of the customer’s complaint, found a solution, and sent that solution to the customer, it’s important to verify that the solution you proposed actually solved the problem. There are a couple of ways to do this:

If you can’t verify that the solution is working, add this line to the end of your communication: “Please let me know if there’s anything else I can do for you. I’m happy to help!”

Verify that the solution is working, then reply with: “I’ve tested this myself and it all appears to be working as expected, which you can see here: (include screenshot). But please let me know if you’re still running into issues.”

In some cases, it may even be worth reaching back out to the customer after a few days have passed to make sure that everything is resolved.

You may also want to consider monitoring any satisfaction ratings you receive on the conversation in your customer service software. Negative feedback may be a sign that there are still issues that need to be addressed (though there will be times that you’ve done everything you can do and the customer will still leave upset).

**Step 5: Log the complaint so you can track trends**

If you have gotten one complaint from one customer about one specific issue over the last 10 years, that issue might not be worth addressing. But if you are getting multiple messages from multiple customers who all shared the same complaint, that is the beginning of a narrative.

To identify high-volume complaints, you’ll need a system for tracking them.

Whatever system you use, the key is to make it easy to capture meaningful complaints and track the volume of customers who are bringing up similar or identical issues.