

SALES AND SERVICE

Excellence

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Service
Strategy

Better
Storytelling

Serve UP Satisfaction
Treat Complaints as Opportunities

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SERVICE/SATISFACTION

Serve UP Satisfaction

Take 10 tips for handling complaints.



by Ron Kaufman

SPIRIT AIRLINES RECENTLY flew into a big PR disaster. Sticking to a *no-refunds* policy, the airline refused to refund the airfare of a passenger who had to cancel his trip after finding out he has terminal cancer. The incident unearthed earlier cases of Spirit's difficulty handling customer complaints. CEO Ben Baldanza hit "Reply All" on an email from two customers who had missed a concert due to a delayed flight. Essentially, he told his employees and (accidentally) the customers that Spirit Airlines didn't owe the customers anything and the customers would be back the next time they wanted low airfare.

Spirit Airlines has a policy—and they are sticking to it. That's how the company chooses to handle customer complaints. Unfortunately, that approach might not be what's best for business. As the Spirit Airlines case shows, sticking to your guns is rarely the best way to handle customer complaints. Learn to handle complaints so that your *unhappy customers* become *customers for life*.

When any company receives a complaint, it has two choices: 1) treat the complaining customer like he's a pain

in the neck; 2) appreciate each complaining customer and use the complaint as an opportunity to improve.

One complaining customer represents many other customers who have the same problem, but don't complain. So, try to uplift them every time. For every person who complains to you, many don't complain but go off and tell somebody else, complain about you



online, and *take their business elsewhere*. If only 1 out of 100 of your customers comes to you with their complaint, shouldn't you value that person times 100, since *he is representing all the other people who never came to you?* You should be appreciative when someone takes the time to give you a second chance.

Here are 10 tips on using customer complaints to uplift your service.

1. Thank them for their complaint.

Give positive recognition by saying, "Thank you for reaching out." Show appreciation for the complaining customer's time, effort, communication, feedback, and suggestions. Remember that the customer didn't have to come to you—he could have simply taken his business to your competitor. When a customer gives you the opportunity to recover their service, be grateful.

2. *Don't be defensive.* It's easy to get defensive with angry customers. They may exaggerate situations, get confused, and lie about how things went down. It's tempting to blow off the customer or say, "No! That's not what happened. You're wrong!" But getting defensive or denying the problem will lead only to more problems. When customers complain, they feel wronged in some way. You don't have to agree with what they say, but you have to agree to hear them out. Keep the conversation moving in a positive direction.

3. *Acknowledge what's important to them.* Find customers' *value dimension* (what's important to *them*). Even if you think the complaint is unfair, there is something they value that your company didn't deliver on. *Embrace that value!* The customer wants to *feel* right. When you agree with the value dimension, you tell them *they are right to value this*

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thing. For example, if a customer says your service was slow, then that customer values speed. You might say, "You deserve quick, efficient service." Or if a customer says your staff was rude, you might say, "We agree that you *should* be treated with courtesy and respect." When you validate what a customer values, you aren't agreeing with them that your service is slow or your staff is rude. You're saying, "We agree with you on what you value, and we want to deliver in those areas."

The last thing customers with a complaint want to hear you say is: You're wrong. They want to hear that you *understand* them, *appreciate* them, and *agree* with them on the *importance of the value* they cite in their complaint. Your responses should make the customer feel *right*. You don't argue over the facts: rude staff, stiff policies, or slow service. You *actively agree* on the importance of what they value most. Customers are *not* always *right*, but they're always *important*; you make them feel better by agreeing with them on the importance of the service dimensions they value.

4. Use judo, not boxing. In *boxing*, you go after your opponent, trying to punch him to the ground. In *judo*, you work with someone else's motions to create a desired result. You use another person's speed and energy to spin him around and then end up together on the same side. *When you show a customer you understand what they value, you catch them off guard with your own movement.* They don't expect you to tell them that they're right. You've avoided a defensive confrontation and you can *spin them* and show the customer that you're now both on the same side and you can work together.

5. Apologize once, upfront. Every service provider knows that the customer is not always right. But the customer *is* always the customer. You don't have to tell the customer you were wrong, but you should apologize for the inconvenience or damage they experienced. When you do so, you show understanding and empathy for their discomfort, displeasure, or inconvenience.

6. Explain the company's desire to improve. When you understand what the customer values, show them *things your company does that helps you perform well in that area*. For example, if a customer complains that a package was delivered late, you might say, "We understand that quick, on-time delivery is important to you. We're working now to find a better solution." Show you are sincere about *doing well in areas the customer values*. You might say, "I'll make sure everyone hears your story. We don't want this to happen again." When you express a desire to improve, you rebuild credibility with the customer.

7. Educate your customer. Part of hearing the customer out is answering any questions and providing additional, useful information. If they ask a question that you can't answer, tell them you'll find out the answer and get back to them. And *follow through*. Contact the customer with the answers they requested. Even if they didn't request an update, get back to them with one anyway. These are chances for you to say through your actions: *We care about you. We value your business.*

8. Contain the problem. Suppose a family is at a crowded theme park on a hot day. The youngest child starts to have a meltdown. Suddenly, a theme park staff member whisks the family into a special air-conditioned room with water and other beverages, an ice cream machine, a bathroom, a comfortable sitting area. That's how you *contain a problem*.

Spirit Airlines could have educated a service provider in uplifting service in responding to the customer's complaint. They might have said, "No matter what our rules or policies are, we see that your circumstance requires flexibility. We want to handle your special situation carefully. Let's work together to figure out what's best. Thank you for reaching out."

9. Recover. Show customers you care about them—even if you feel the company did everything right—by making them an offer. Companies worry they'll be *taken advantage of* if they give vouchers, discounts, or freebies in their service recovery, but that rarely happens. Offer the customer *something as a gesture of goodwill or token of appreciation*.

Sears now has a team of specially educated and empowered staff to handle recoveries. Once an issue goes to them, what they recommend is what gets done. Sears sees that a recovered customer can become a most loyal advocate and ally.

10. Give serial complainers an out. Some people love to complain, not so that they can *become* satisfied but because they are never satisfied. With them, you must limit your liability and isolate them from your brand. Give your *constant complainers* an out. In dealing with *serial complainers*, that's the best thing you can do.

You and your customers are both on the same side. Your customer wants the product or service you provide, and you want to give it to them. When you treat *complaints* as *opportunities* to build loyalty, you create customers for life and uplift your company in the process.

SSE

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ACTION: Improve in handling customer complaints.

