



# Dealing with Difficult Customers

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If you work with the public, you know perfectly well that sometimes customers can be difficult. Some are demanding. Some are emotional. Some are just downright cranky. This fact sheet will help employees better understand the different types of customers they must regularly face and will offer techniques to help diffuse some situations.

## Is Your Customer Being Difficult?

Let's be clear about the difference between a difficult customer and a customer who simply has a problem with your company, office or organization. Customers may behave quite appropriately by pointing out a problem they are having. Difficult customers take things further—too far.

For example, a customer at a local restaurant may politely point out that the ticket has an appetizer shown on it, but they never ordered an appetizer. This person is not being difficult. They just have a problem that the waiter needs to address efficiently.

On the other hand, consider a traveler whose flight has been cancelled because the Chicago airport was shut down due to weather. When they decide to deal with this inconvenience by yelling obscenities at the airlines representative in Dallas-Fort Worth, they are most certainly being difficult.

## Why are Customers Difficult?

Perhaps the important thing to know about difficult customers is that they are being difficult for their own reasons, which generally have nothing to do with you. If we knew about our difficult customer's medical diagnosis, for example, we would probably have more patience. Most of the time, that luxury does not exist. Most of the time, the customers' real problems (marital difficulties, financial issues, health problems) are hidden.

Yes, your customers sometimes take these hidden problems out on your employees, but remember they are, unfortunately, just the person to whom the customer is going to vent. It's no fun. It's not fair. But it is life. Take a deep breath, remain calm and do your best to help solve your customer's business-related problem.

## Who are Your Difficult Customers?

Psychologists have a long history of defining human personalities based on four categories. David Merrill and Roger Reid developed one of these models in their book, *Personal*

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*Styles and Effective Performance.* The four Merrill-Reid "personal styles" provide a useful way of looking at potentially difficult customers. First, let's take a look at them in general terms.

1. **Driver:** If Drivers had a slogan it would be "Let's get it done now, and get it done my way" (Merrill and Reid, p. 62). Other words used to describe the driver include pushy, tough, dominating, harsh, decisive and strong-willed. They know what they want, and they like to get things done quickly.
2. **Expressive:** Expressives are social people who are in touch with their emotions. "They like to involve other people with their feelings and thoughts," according to Merrill and Reid (p. 63). Expressives tend to dream big about the future, but may overlook daily details. Other words used to describe this style are dramatic, friendly, creative, excitable, stimulating, enthusiastic, manipulative and undisciplined.
3. **Analytic:** Analytics like to "look at the facts in a systematic way" according to Merrill and Reid (p. 66). They may also be cautious about "showing personal warmth." Other words used to describe this style include critical, serious, exacting, orderly, picky, stuffy and moralistic. They have a great desire to get things right.
4. **Amiable:** Being accepted by others is very important to an amiable person. Amiables use understanding and mutual respect in social situations. Most people "like" them. Other words used to describe this style include supportive, agreeable, respectful, diplomatic, unsure, conforming, awkward and pliable. Amiables also place a high priority on feeling safe.

Do any of these sound familiar? Do you know people who are perfect fits for each of the four styles? How about your own personal style?

Most people read such descriptions and find that they relate to one or more of the personality types. Psychologists believe that we have a dominant style—even when we are able to draw from one or more of the other types.

## The Personalities as Difficult Customers

As you read the descriptions of the four personalities, you may have noticed some clues as to how each of the four

personalities can turn into difficult customers. Let's take a look at each personality type from that perspective (a methodology attributed to Peter Urs Bender).

## Driver

Drivers can become angry quickly when they realize that someone did not do their job properly. They can become infuriated when told that something "can't be done," especially when the driver thinks they know how it CAN be done.

A driver as a difficult customer will burst into your presence and will immediately be loud, domineering and perhaps even verbally confrontational. Listen for phrases like, "I want to know who is going to fix this! Who is going to get this done? I need this taken care of right now!"

### **A few techniques that will NOT work with a driver are:**

1. Failing to take a stand one way or the other. They have more respect for you when you take a stand. This can be challenging for an employee who is an amiable. Answers such as, "Well, we could maybe do this or maybe do that" are incredibly frustrating to the driver.
2. Blindly quoting the rules. The best rules to a driver are the rules that they, themselves, made. It certainly is the "my way or the highway" mentality. Drivers may express derision when quoted rules and regulations, and yet this is exactly how an analytic may want to handle the situation.
3. Telling them it can't be done. This phrase, in fact, is so maddening to a driver that it can turn a driver from "a customer with an issue" into a "difficult customer."

What is the best way to handle a driver as a difficult customer? Drivers want things done to their own satisfaction and they want to know who is going to get it done. That being the case, tell them. Phrases to which drivers respond positively might include the following.

"I am going to personally look into this problem."

"I will find that answer and call you with the information by 5 p.m. today."

Furthermore, if you tell them you are going to call them by 5 p.m., then you absolutely must call them by 5 p.m. even if you don't have all the answers. Dealing with a driver involves telling them exactly what you are going to do and exactly when you are going to do it. If you say you will do it—do it. Follow through.

Contact the driver at a later date and ask if everything was handled acceptably. Here is a little hint: If things were not handled well, you would have already heard from the driver. Calling with an unsolicited follow-up just earns you bonus points.

## Expressive

Expressives are quick to express their emotions. They may take problems experienced at your business as personal affronts. Some (although certainly not all) expressives may cry as a way to express their displeasure.

When dealing with an expressive as a difficult customer, listen for phrases like the following.

"I don't understand why you would do this to me."

"I think somebody is trying to cheat me."

"Why are you doing this to me?"

### **Techniques that will NOT work with an expressive include:**

1. Blindly quoting or even showing them written versions of rules and regulations. In fact, if an employee (perhaps an

analytic) attempts to place written rules or documentation on a counter in front of an expressive customer, they may use their hand to brush the papers away. It may even be a subconscious action on their part.

2. Becoming bossy and telling them that they must do this and must do that (as a driver employee might be prone to do.) This response could be taken as a personal affront by the expressive.

A bank employee once said that an expressive customer called the bank and wanted to know why they were trying to "steal" from her (by imposing overdraft charges.) The bank employee, who may have been an amiable, was genuinely upset by the exchange. She tried her best to both listen carefully and politely explain. She told her supervisor about the phone call, but she remained bothered for days.

A few days later, the supervisor placed a phone call to the expressive customer to see if everything was okay. The customer said (in a very friendly tone), "Oh yes. Everything is fine. I had just gotten some bad news that day and let it get to me."

In other words, our conscientious bank employee had worried about the exchange longer than the expressive customer had. The expressive customer was just having a bad day and needed to let it out.

The example illustrates the best technique for dealing with an expressive customer. Listen. Give them a sympathetic ear. Nod to show you are paying attention. Do not interrupt the expressive as they are venting, but when appropriate use empathetic phrases such as:

"I totally understand."

"I've been there before and I know how hard it can be."

"I wouldn't like that either."

As you might have guessed from the example, the amiable employee, with their ability to see both sides of a situation, is naturally equipped to deal with an expressive who is having a bad experience.

## Analytic

Analytics are introverts who prefer to avoid conflict whenever possible. They will express displeasure, however, when they have "proof" of a problem. In fact, the analytic with a problem will almost always have something in their hands that they intend to show you as proof. It could be a monthly statement, written rules or regulations or other printed materials. An analytic with a problem is most likely to turn difficult when the validity of their data is questioned or if it is completely ignored.

### **Techniques that do not work with an analytic include:**

1. An emotional response. Probably the worst reaction to an analytic is an emotional reaction. Expressive employees, particularly, will want to focus on remaining calm by not taking the criticism to heart. An overly emotional response on the part of the employee can cause the analytic to detach from the situation (and leave unhappy) or become very frustrated.
2. A dictatorial response. An analytic will have the greatest conflict with a driver when the driver insists on a particular way with no precedent for the behavior or written rules to govern the situation. Analytics do not believe you just because you said so. They will believe you if you can show it to them in writing.

A school board member attending a statewide workshop told a story about an analytic with a complaint. He told of a school patron who visited his home and demanded to speak about a teacher. The patron claimed to be holding a copy of the teacher's personnel file—a sure sign that the patron was an analytic. He had some "proof" in his hand.

The school board member immediately became concerned and made the patron aware that it was against the rules for him, the patron, to have that file. Nor was it appropriate for the school board member to see it. Immediately, the patron became contrite at the idea that he was doing something improper or against the rules. The patron left and did not bother the school board member again. Thus, references to laws and rules can be an effective way of handling difficult analytics.

Whether an analytic is a difficult customer or just a customer with a problem that needs to be resolved, the best way to deal with this customer is treat their "proof" as serious. Look at it. Read it carefully.

If at all possible, reciprocate with the analytic. In other words, if they bring you some proof, make sure to provide your own proof for them to take away. For example, make a copy of the rule that must be followed and give it to the customer. Print out a corrected billing statement and use a highlighter to show where adjustments were made. Provide the analytic with a brochure that explains how a program works. Just make sure that they leave with something in their hands.

## **Amiable**

You might have guessed that the amiable customer is the least likely customer to be difficult. It is a part of their very nature to avoid conflict. When there is a problem, they will do their best to see your side of the issue.

In a way, this makes the amiable customer one of your most challenging customers. When they have a problem with you, the employees or business, they probably won't complain or make a scene. In order to avoid conflict, they will simply choose to do business somewhere else.

If you know you have some amiables as customers, do the groundwork up front. In other words, develop a personal relationship with them. Make them aware that you are not only willing to hear about problems they might have, but are anxious to hear from them if there is a problem. Make sure they know how valuable they are as customers—even as friends.

If you are successful in building relationships with amiable customers, you might just be fortunate enough to have some of them come to you with a problem. If you are able to solve the amiable customers' problems, you will strengthen their loyalty to you, your brand and your business.

## **General Rules for Dealing with Difficult Customers – The LAST Technique**

In the field of customer service, the LAST technique is a generally accepted method for dealing with difficult customers. LAST is an acronym for Listen, Apologize, Solve and Thank. All four actions have the potential to help in a situation with any of the personal styles described in the preceding paragraphs.

### **Listen**

Listen—for as long as the upset customer wants to talk. Do not interrupt. Do not put your defenses up. Do not mentally

plan your rebuttal. Truly listen and try to understand what the customer is saying.

You listen with your ears, but you also need to use body language to indicate to the customer that you are thoughtfully engaged. Lean forward slightly, but don't invade their personal space. Keep your hands and arms relaxed. Do not lean back with your arms over your chest. Keep your lips, mouth and jaw relaxed. Many people are quick to clench their jaws and frown as soon as they face a difficult situation.

Once you have heard the customer's problem, attempt to repeat back some of the things they said. It shows you were paying attention and it can also give them the opportunity to clarify certain points to ensure you understand correctly.

### **Apologize**

Keep in mind that apologizing does not necessarily mean that you claim direct responsibility for the problem on the behalf of either yourself or the organization. You may have to accept blame at some point, but be sure to fully understand the situation before that happens. Do not accuse or blame the customer. It may absolutely be their fault, but no personality type enjoys hearing how wrong they are.

Okay, so what are you apologizing for? You are mostly trying to convey that you acknowledge their feelings. Consider the following empathetic phrases.

"I apologize you are experiencing this problem."

"That must be very upsetting for you."

"I understand, and I know how frustrating it can be."

"I am so sorry you have to deal with this."

### **Solve**

Do what you can to help solve your customer's problem. Become your customer's advocate. Think about that for a minute. What does it mean to be an advocate? It means you actually care. It means you really do want to figure out the problem and a solution. It means you really do want to help this person. Customers can tell the difference between an employee who truly wants to help and one who is just going through the motions.

### **Thank**

It is not easy to thank a person who has just made your life difficult for the last 20 minutes! Even so, you need to end this conversation on a positive note. Find something to be thankful for, such as:

"Thank you for bringing this to our attention."

"Thank you for being a loyal customer over the years."

"Thank you for your patience while I take care of this."

After the incident is over, remember two more things: follow through and follow up. If you said you were going to do something for the customer—perhaps call them back with a piece of information—be sure to do what you promised. All personal styles need follow through, but the driver, in particular will demand it.

Finally, follow up. Contact the customer to make sure everything was handled to their satisfaction, or check to see if there is anything else you can do to improve the situation.

### **Final Advice**

Recall that customers who behave inappropriately are doing so because of their own issues. There will be many

times when you or an employee will not be able to satisfy these customers.

The bottom line is that you want to be able to know you did your best. You remained calm. You were professional.

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service offers a training called Dealing with Difficult Customers as a part of its customer service series of workshops. Contact your county Extension office for more information.

### **Resources:**

Bacal, Robert. *Diffusing Difficult Customers Workbook: A Self-Instructional Workbook for Public Sector Employees*. Casselman, Ontario: Bacal & Associates, 2010.

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