



How to Defuse an Irate Customer



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By John Tschohl

Underneath the obnoxious behavior, shouting, clenched fists, finger-pointing, and red-faced antagonism, most irate customers have a sad message. Most likely, they are trying to tell you that they are feeling hurt, ignored, disrespected, unappreciated and unloved.

It's easy to get flustered or upset when you're confronted by an angry customer. And if you don't know how to respond, you can easily make the situation worse. However, when you respond calmly and with empathy, you can stay in control, and you can defuse the situation in a professional, courteous way. Try these steps when dealing with angry/irate customers.

1. **Listen.** Responding to their needs calmly and emphatically can serve as the key to getting more cooperation from emotionally agitated people. In tough situations, the original issue often becomes secondary if it's handled poorly. How the issue is handled can make the difference between a big problem and a small problem.
2. **Acknowledge their anger.** Empathy is powerful. If a customer expresses anger and you fail to react to it, they feel like they aren't getting through, that you're not listening. Think about how you would feel in a similar situation. Acknowledge their anger and respond to it. You can react to anger with a statement like, *"Obviously you're annoyed and I would like you to know that getting to the bottom of this is just as important to me as it is to you."* Or *"I think I understand what is going on here, but feel free to correct me."*

3. **Ask Questions.** Do not argue or assign any blame. Once you have an understanding of the situation, try to avoid making excuses or defending your actions (or those of your team or organization). Defensiveness can make others feel even angrier than they are already. Instead, ask what you can do to resolve the situation and make things right. You need to show the customer that, as an employee and as the face of your organization, you are invested in solving the problem.
4. **Suggest Alternatives.** Solicit what the irate customer wants from you. You want to keep moving the situation along in a productive way. After the person expresses what he or she wants, determine what you're able to do and say so. Think outside the box. You can stay within your organization's guidelines and still come up with an alternative. Customers will view it as a sign of respect and an indication that you are listening to their specific concerns.
5. **Apologize.** Say "I'm sorry." It may not be your fault. In all likelihood, it is not your fault in any way, but apologizing without laying blame will better position you to act in a manner that your customer perceives to be in their best interest.
6. **Solve the problem.** Take everything you have learned about the situation in preparation for this final step. At this point, both you and your customer share a strong desire to find a solution. If you need help while you are solving the problem, find it. Regardless of how a problem is solved, getting it done quickly is key to bringing this irate customer around. Provide your contact information to the customer in case they have any questions or lingering problems.

Throughout your interaction, don't forget that you must not take it personally. What's needed in the presence of a hot-headed person? A cool-headed person. When you feel your blood start to boil in response to a customer's anger, take a deep breath and remember that you are the master of your emotions. Whenever possible, prepare yourself in advance.

Before the encounter tell yourself:

- "I can handle this. It may be rough, but I can do it."
- "If I feel myself getting upset, I'll know what to do."

During the encounter tell yourself:

- "Be calm, relax, and breathe."
- "I am not taking this personally."
- "I must look and act calm."

After the encounter tell yourself:

- "I did a good job. I can do this. I'm getting better at this."
- "I felt a little perturbed, but I didn't lose my cool."

Without being patronizing or condescending, just show decency and understanding. It will go a long way in helping an irate customer see a better way to resolve problems.

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