

Handling the Irate Caller

If you let it, one call from an irate customer can ruin your day. It can affect subsequent calls and your whole disposition for hours. It can cause stress that even carries over to your private life after you have gone home. We would like to share some tips with you on how to deal with an angry customer. Most of these ideas come from "How To Win Friends and Not Lose Customers" (a cassette course as well as a seminar) presented by Strawberry Communications.

They Are Your Best Customers

One important thing to keep in mind is that irate callers are often your company's *best customers*. That's right. They are willing to take the time to let you know what you are doing wrong! It's through them that you will learn ways to improve.

These things will make the irate caller even more irate:

- Being put on hold.
- Being disconnected.
- Being shuffled from one department to another.
- Being forced to repeat the problem over and over to these different departments.
- Relating the complaint to a person who is audibly eating, chewing or smoking.
- Relating the complaint to someone who is carrying on another conversation and obviously not listening.

You know yourself if you have ever had a complaint and had any of these things happen, didn't it make you furious? I bet you hated the company even more. Right?

Yet when you had a complaint which was taken care of to your satisfaction, promptly and courteously, you felt good about the company — valued as a customer — didn't you? You probably even told your co-workers and friends about how well you were treated.

Recent studies have proven that customers who have complained and had the complaint satisfied are the most loyal customers you can find. They will stay with you literally "forever."

Explosive Situation

The irate caller has a short fuse to begin with and it won't take much to set it off. The customer who is angry or who feels "wronged" in some way, will be frustrated and will take out that frustration on

whoever takes the call. If you're the unlucky recipient of the call, you can feel like a victim, but try not to take these calls personally. Keep in mind these are your *best customers* and follow these rules.

- Hear them out.
- Have patience.
- Use tact.
- Empathize.
- Acknowledge the validity of the complaint.
- Don't interrupt.

And, most importantly:

- Don't be argumentative. It won't do you any good to win one inning if you wind up losing the whole ball game!

With an unhappy customer, the name of the game is CONCEDE — not CONVINCING.

Agree With Everything

It's impossible for anyone to remain angry with someone who agrees with everything that is said. So use statements like these:

"I understand how you feel."

"I agree that someone needs to service you."

"I know you are extremely upset over this."

"I can see we need to help you right away."

"You have every right to feel this way."

Mt. Anger

It takes no more than two minutes for an angry customer to vent his/her wrath. Strawberry Communications refers to it as a mountain of anger (picture facing page). By the end of the two minutes, the irate caller will have climbed to the top of Mt. Anger and will then begin to descend the other side or calm down. If you interrupt during the climb, it will cause the angry customer to slide back down and begin again to ascend the mountain. If you keep interrupting, it will be up-down, up-down. You must let the caller get to the top of the mountain in one climb.

On this side of the mountain it's important that you be quiet. Silence is Golden. Let the customer reach the summit of Mt. Anger. How do you know when he/she gets there? You'll hear a sound of relief — a sort of "phew" which really means "There! I told them a thing or two!"

The Other Side of the Mountain

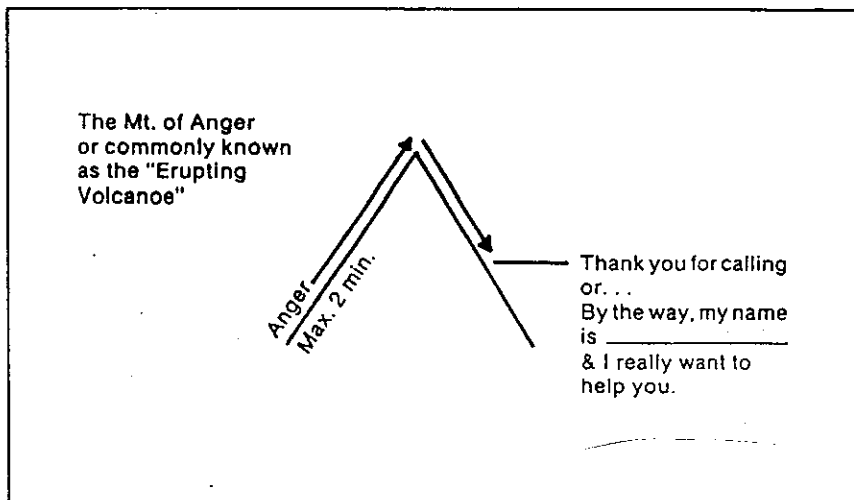
Now your job is not to let this angry customer slide down the other side of the mountain, but to provide a cushion along the way. The first thing to say is: **"Thank you for calling."**

If the customer has been really nasty and abusive, you might have to grit your teeth while you say it, but you must say it.

Why must you thank irate callers? Again, because they are your best customers! They tell you what you are not doing right.

The next thing to say is: **"By the way, my name is _____ and I really want to help you."**

If you can get by those first two minutes of climbing Mt. Anger, you can begin to communicate as you help the customer calm down.



Reproduced, with permission, from Strawberry Communications' "How To Win Friends and Not Lose Customers" workbook.

Controlling Factor: Your Voice

Your voice is the most important controlling factor in handling an irate caller. As the customer raises his/her voice, you lower yours. As he/she rants on, stumbling over words, you speak — slowly — evenly — articulate every word. To someone in an emotional upheaval, this can be a real tranquilizer. It not only calms the caller down, it calms you down and there is truth in the old saying: "No sense in BOTH of us being hysterical!"

Swearing and Cussin'

What if the caller becomes so enraged that he/she swears at you or gets really personally abusive? Most managers will agree that in that case you are perfectly justified in hanging up. You might give them a chance to change their tune by saying: "Mr. Customer, I feel that I can no longer help you if you speak to me like this. If you don't stop, I am going to have to hang up."

If they continue to swear or abuse you — HANG UP! You might

call back after they have cooled down in about 10 minutes. Usually they will be embarrassed and say: "I'm sorry. I was upset . . ." etc., etc.

Janet Gorman in "How To Win Friends and Not Lose Customers" says that when a customer swears, she'll say, "Will you repeat that please?"

Janet notes that the swearer usually is too embarrassed to repeat the invectives.

Business can't be conducted in the gutter and if you don't succeed in elevating a foul-mouthed caller, just hang up. You are too professional to sink to their level.

Follow Up

Once you have turned the irate caller around (and this is a skill you should master) get right to the business at hand. *Solve the problem!* If you can't, find the person who can. Then *follow through!* Log every complaint and record how it was resolved.

A follow-up call to the customer a day or two later, asking if everything has been settled satisfactorily, is well worth your effort. The customer will remember your efficiency and help long after the original complaint has been forgotten. That customer is YOURS!

Good Selling!

□CBT

The source of this article is "How To Win Friends and Not Lose Customers," a cassette course on telephone etiquette presented by Strawberry Communications. This fine course is also a seminar presented throughout the United States. Contact: Strawberry Communications, 5050 Quorum Drive, Suite 360, Dallas, Texas 75240. (214) 239-5699.

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