EXPLORING CUSTOMER RELATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The best work environment is one in which employers and employees work together as a team, supporting, leading, and sharing goals. In such an environment, each person must meet his or her responsibilities and do a good job. Every employee on the team must help the employer sustain this spirit of cooperation and achievement. None of this is possible if you don’t work with customer complaints effectively.

This packet is about handling customer complaints. As an employee, if you don’t work with customer complaints effectively, you won’t have good relations with your customers. If an employee doesn’t have good relations with customers his or her job may be in jeopardy.

THE PROBLEM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

It happens in all businesses: customers do complain, and legitimately so. Even in the best business, things can go wrong. Orders aren’t shipped, or don’t arrive on time, wrong items are sent, parking lots are full, conditions in the store or office are too hot or too cold or too crowded. Service is slow and lines are long.

As a result, part of your job as an employee is to deal with customer complaints. If you don’t learn to do so effectively, it could cost your company in customer loyalty and goodwill. Customers expect to be treated well and to receive the best in products or services. If they don’t, they may well decide to take their business elsewhere. As an employee, it’s up to you and your coworkers to make sure that doesn’t happen.
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CAUSES OF CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS

Let’s look at some of the reasons why customers may complain. We’re not talking about “difficult” customers, but about ordinary, average people who bring a legitimate, well-founded complaint about your business. Here are some of the things you may hear:

1. Complaints about a product or service
   - Product or service is of inferior quality
   - Product or service isn’t “as advertised”
   - Product or service isn’t delivered or completed on time
   - Product or service didn’t meet customer’s needs

2. Company complaints
   - Company isn’t perceived as professional in approach
   - Company is too large/small to meet customer’s needs
   - Company is too cold and impersonal (or small and informal)
   - Store or office is too hot/cold/dark/bright, etc.
   - Parking lot full (or parking places too far away)

3. Employee complaints
   - Too long a wait for service
   - Employees rude or indifferent
   - Service too slow
   - Incorrect information given
   - Deliveries not made on time
   - Incorrect charges made (prices not checked; customer overcharged, etc.)
   - Employee did not follow up with the customer

WHAT IT MEANS TO WORK WITH CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS

Working effectively with customer complaints means having the ability to listen carefully and attentively to what the customer says. It also means the ability to accept well-founded criticism of yourself, your product and your company. Let’s look
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at each of these traits in turn.

Listening attentively is often all that’s needed to quiet an angry or disturbed customer. Often, he or she simply wants to feel listened to and acknowledged. As you probably know from experience, one of the most frustrating aspects of receiving the wrong merchandise, being overcharged for something, or being treated rudely or ignored by salespeople is the helpless, powerless feeling—the feeling that, “I don’t count.” The customer who brings a complaint to you often is feeling exactly this sense of frustration. Usually, your listening ear is the best antidote to this helplessness, anger and futility.

But something more than listening is involved, and that’s the ability to hear and accept criticisms of yourself, your product and your company. That’s difficult for all of us, partly because we each have so much invested in our own competence on the job, the quality of the product or service we represent, and the image of the company for which we work.

Unfortunately, not every company or every person gives 100% all the time. When errors occur, it’s best to admit them and then ask the customer, “What can I do to help?” With this kind of win/win attitude, most customers will feel better about whatever issue they bring to your place of business.

CASE STUDIES

ERIC AND HIS EXCUSES

Eric loves to make excuses. No matter what the circumstances, Eric will never take responsibility for his actions. It’s always someone else’s fault, never his.

Eric is a writer for a small company that produces training materials for other companies. Eric’s supervisor insists that the materials each writer produces be checked by the project manager assigned to that particular project.
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Myron is one of the company’s best clients. Eric recently completed a long policy and procedures manual for Myron’s company, a large health care clinic. Julie was the project manager and signed off on it before she left for a meeting with an out-of-town client.

Unfortunately, Eric didn’t show Julie Myron’s detailed list of instructions about how the manual was to be put together—chiefly because he had lost it the first week of the project. Julie, working on incomplete information, looked only at the content of the manual and not at its form.

A few days later, an irate Myron burst into Eric’s office. “How could you do this?” he complained. “You’ve ignored the list of instructions I gave you. Now it’s all in the wrong format, and we’ve got one day to get it to the printer.”

“Hey, what can I do?” Eric responded. “It’s all Julie’s fault. She signed off on the project so I thought it was OK. What can I do?” He shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

But Myron had one idea of what could be done. He went to the company’s owners, whom he knew and complained about Eric’s attitude. “I’ve never heard so many excuses in my life,” Myron said. “Maybe you’d better think twice before you put him on any more long projects.”

ROBIN IS RUDE

Robin is a salesperson in a large bookstore which sells popular fiction and nonfiction at discount prices. It’s a busy, high-volume business with many telephone and customer inquiries.

Robin is often asked to answer the telephone during lunchtime, when the store is busiest. Frequently, she’s asked to look up the title or author of a book with which she’s not familiar. She often promises to call the customer back. Sometimes she does, but sometimes she doesn’t. Robin doesn’t really care a great deal about her work.
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Last week, a customer called to complain about a mail order that was never received. She had ordered several expensive art books as birthday gifts for a friend, and they had not arrived on time. The customer was angry and upset and demanded a refund on her credit card. The books had arrived too late to be gifts and she had no use for them.

“Hey, don’t yell at me!” was Robin’s response. “It’s not my fault. I didn’t take the order. If you’ve got a problem, call the store manager!”

The customer did, and in the process, referred to the “rude salespeople” who answer the phone in his store. “I’m going to start buying my books at the new bookstore in the mall,” the customer told him. “At least THEIR salespeople are courteous to customers over the telephone!”

PROBLEM PREVENTION

Working effectively with customer complaints involves the ability to listen and to admit mistakes, as we have already seen. It also involves the ability to put yourself in the customer’s place and understand why he or she is upset about a certain situation.

Ultimately, what’s called for is the ability to put your own ego aside for the moment and understand what your customer needs and wants. It may be as simple as offering an apology and a refund for merchandise that was received late, as with Robin and her customer, or as complex as re-doing an inferior or incorrectly-done job, as in the case of Eric and Myron. Whatever the situation, remember that the customer has a legitimate complaint that needs to be heard, checked out, assessed, and corrected if possible.
## The purpose of this Response Packet is to help students realize the importance of responding properly to **customer complaints**. Although concepts learned, such as listening well and being courteous, could be applied to many different situations—such as one’s role as a student. Questions were written to facilitate class discussion where students can learn from each other.

If you need additional space to answer a question, please use the space on the reverse side of the page. Should you have any questions about this material, please ask the person who gave you the packet.

1. Why might a customer bring a complaint about a business or store to an employee?

2. How should an employee respond to a legitimate customer complaint?

3. How should an employee respond to a complaint that isn’t true?
4. Should an employee tell a supervisor about every customer complaint? Explain.

5. Why do supervisors take customer complaints so seriously?

6. Agree or disagree with the following statement: “Handling customer complaints is a branch of public relations.” Why do you agree or disagree?

7. What was Eric’s mistake in handling Myron’s complaint?

8. Was Eric’s excuse a good reason for not doing Myron’s manual correctly? Explain.

9. How might Robin have handled her customer differently?

10. Can being attentive to every complaint help a company do a better job of serving customers? Explain.
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1. Name at least two major areas of customer complaints in a retail business.

2. Name at least two areas of customer complaints in a service business.

3. Do you think that customers complain just to be difficult? Explain your answer.
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<th>STUDENT RESPONSE PACKET 2</th>
<th>CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS</th>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Name at least two things that an employee needs to do to handle customer complaints more effectively.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Why is listening carefully an important key to resolving customer complaints?</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>Have you ever taken a complaint about a store or office back to that company? Who dealt with your complaint and how?</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Why did Eric try to blame Julie for his failure to do a good job on Myron’s project?</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>From Myron’s point of view, was the situation resolved fairly?</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>If you were the customer who complained to Robin, what would you have to say about the way you were treated?</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>What skills or techniques would you employ when working with a customer complaint about a product that doesn’t work as advertised?</td>
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STUDENT RESPONSE PUZZLE 1  CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS

NAME ___________________________ DATE ___________________________

Across

2. Sometime setting some of these will help you work more effectively
6. Part of your job as an employee is to deal with these complaints
7. Listening to an angry customer is often the best one of these
9. When this occurs it’s best to admit them
10. Myron’s company is a large _____ care clinic

Down

1. She is often asked to answer the telephone during lunchtime
3. Working effectively with customer complaints means having the ability to do this carefully and attentively
4. We all should be able to accept well-founded _____
5. Eric is this for a small company
8. Customers expect to be treated this way
STUDENT RESPONSE PUZZLE 2  

CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS

NAME ______________________  DATE ______________________

Y T J G R C C U S T O M E R F
R A T B U T V X C K W E L L T
A N E P Y H N Y H U X Z C E N
K T V J T E E I V I S M C J W
A I Z J E K W A N I Z C R O Q
X D U E T K S V L L L T I N Y
R O Z D N R K Y P T F D T Q Q
O T S X O D J E U U H M I W J
B E U R B B G K W R W F C L M
I S R T L U J Z R A C K I R Q
N E B D I Q Z D I J G X S P I
P E Z Q S Q E M T Y S O M F P
I B S K T E L G E H C C A B R
C L S U E B U J R L T X S L O
C N C Y N N O E Y R J Q Y O S

customer
well
listen
criticism
antidotes
errors
writer
Robin
goals
health