



# Seven ways to defuse angry customers

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It's the nightmare that every businessperson experiences: a shouting match with a customer or client. Flush with frustration over something gone wrong, the client or customer flies into an uncontrollable rage. Complaints crescendo into shouts, accusations fly and, sad to say, an occasional profanity slices what little silence remains. Although every small businessperson needs a bucket of water to douse these sorts of fires, it's hard to know where to reach amid the flames. Here are seven at-the-ready responses that may help tame even the most unpleasant situation:

- "Let's go over what's happened." This simple phrase covers several powerful areas. For one thing, by asking your client to recount the wrong, you're forcing him to think, not just vent. That unto itself can smooth things considerably: On top of that, you're letting the other person know that you're genuinely interested in his or her version of what happened. Lastly, it deals you some time to listen and, hopefully, devise a solution to the problem at hand.
- "Let's get together to talk about this." If a client is `screeching at you over the phone, suggest that you meet face to face to iron out what's wrong. Again, that can inject some much-needed cooling down time into the situation. And, no matter if your customer is a quick-to-back-off bully or simply conscious of behaving more civilly face to face, chances are good that your conversation will be far more controlled and productive when you actually get together.
- "Let's have someone else hear what's happened." Confrontations between customers and business owners are akin to two rams butting heads; not only is there little movement one way or the other, you can end up with a mountain-sized migraine for your trouble.

Another way to defuse the situation and work toward a resolution is to call in a third party. This could be a partner or someone else with whom you work. Have

them listen to the issue. Make sure this informal arbiter knows that he or she should approach the situation as objectively as possible; that may cue both you and your customer to do the same.

- "Let's see what we can do to resolve this." Having heard every possible side of the story, this reaffirms your intent to hammer out a solution that's satisfactory to everyone involved. Not only that, but your commitment to a fair resolution also moves past the accusation and moves toward identifying what went wrong and taking reasonable steps to correct it.

- "Let's hear how you think we should solve this." Be selective in choosing this strategy. If you already understand what the client wants - and it's unacceptable - then this is not the right line to use. But if a resolution isn't obvious, you're tossing the issue into your customer's lap, which, may help her appreciate your perspective and, in turn, suggest a reasonable conclusion:

**C**onversely, the customer may suggest a resolution that costs you and your company big, so you need to step carefully here. Gauge where the other person is with this tack - the more steam he seems to have let *off*, *the* greater the chances for success:

- "Let's talk about ways this won't happen again." This is the death knell for what once was a customer tirade. Once more, this demonstrates your interest in both your client's ideas as well as your ongoing commitment to solid customer care. Not only have you worked carefully to craft a suitable conclusion to the issue at hand; you also want to make doubly sure that this particular snafu never resurfaces. And, should your client offer ideas that seem reasonable, implement them to make certain the dead stay six feet-down.

- "Let's use 'let's' as much as we can." Of course, you wouldn't actually say this out loud, but note that the prior six ideas all begin with the first person plural: No matter how you approach the problem of a peeved customer, try to be as inclusive as possible in every solution you offer.

For one thing, that immediately defuses the "us versus them" landmine. For another, you also let the person on the other side of the issue know that you consider a common understanding as an important outcome to the discussion.