

# Ten Ways to Get An Angry Customer To Back Down

Being intimidated by difficult customers, ignoring their behavior, or tiptoeing around the turbulent situation is not healthy or productive and, in most cases, doesn't even lead to customer satisfaction. Here are 10 field-tested strategies for assertively responding to anger – strategies that have been proven highly effective for getting irate customers to back down.

## 1. Lower your volume

When I want my three-year-old daughter to use her “inside voice”, I don't yell, “Lauren, USE YOUR INSIDE VOICE!” I speak in my “inside voice” with the expectation that she will mirror the calm tone of my voice...and she does without any further prompting from me. We must use the same technique with demanding customers. Escalating your voice when dealing with an upset customer will not create calm. It will only incite your customer. Lowering your voice presents you as confident, in control, and credible. In many cases your angry customer will begin to calm down because he realizes his intimidation tactic (yelling) isn't working. Try making one of these statements in a low volume when dealing with an angry customer. “What can I do to help?” or “What can I do to fix this situation?”

## 2. Express empathy

When dealing with rage or verbal abuse, an effective approach is to express empathy in a low and sincere tone. The April 19, 1999 issue of *Computerworld* magazine reports that 83% of network managers have seen computer users trash keyboards, shatter monitors, smash mice, and kick hard drives. Talk about a difficult customer! One help desk professional says his chief strategy for dealing with the rage of computer users is to empathize with this statement: “*I know how you feel, I've felt the same way myself and this is what I've found.*” Just imagine how calming this statement would be to you if you were the computer user experiencing a problem.

## 3. Be personal

You need to know that failure to take accountability and placing blame for the problem on another department, employee, or a third party really ticks customers off. Personalizing the resolution

process, on the other hand, works wonders. Consider the difference in perception from these two statements:

*A. You experienced this problem because you made the reservation through our 800 number and the special discount you wanted is only offered when you book online.*

OR...

*B. I realize how confusing this can be and I am sorry for any inconvenience this misunderstanding has caused you. Let me explain what I think has happened here...*

The second statement offers a personal apology, blames no one, and even includes an explanation.

## **4. Form partnerships**

Upset customers very often come to you with the expectation that they will not get a satisfactory resolution to their problem. They expect to hear excuses, be told “no”, or be given a run around. This expectation, coupled with the actual problem they have experienced, makes them more frustrated and that frustration is vented toward customer service professionals. Knowing that your customer has low expectations for problem resolution is your vantage point because you can respond in such a way that makes

it clear that you and the customer are on the same team with phrases like, *“First of all, I need you to know that we want to get the bottom of this just as much as you do.”* Or *“The problem you experienced is no more acceptable to us than it was to you.”* Letting the customer know that you are their advocate and not their adversary is a great tool you can use to create calm.

## **5. Ask the customer for solution ideas**

When your attempts to resolve the problem fail, consider asking the customer how she’d like to see the problem resolved. You might say, *“Tell me how you see us resolving this problem.”* The customer will be impressed that you have asked them for a solution – so impressed that anger begins to immediately dissipate and very often their idea of a resolution is much less than you were willing to give.

## **6. Make sure your tone is non-defensive**

I believe you can say almost anything to anyone if you say it the right way. Communication experts tell us that over the telephone 14% of our message is conveyed with our words and 86% is conveyed with our tone. Your words might say *“I want to help you.”* But your tone may say

you are inconvenienced, defensive, irritated, or apathetic. Make sure your tone says you are helpful and professional.

## **7. Express appreciation for the customer's**

**feedback...**even when they deliver the feedback in a socially inappropriate way.

One of the *Golden Rules of Complaint Resolution* is to Express Appreciation for the Feedback. We do this because complaining customers are giving us valuable feedback that can help improve our business as well as help us maintain loyalty. Another reason we express appreciation for feedback is for the shock value. The last thing an irate customer expects to hear from an employee is *"Thank you for taking the time to tell us about this. We appreciate customers who let us know when things aren't right."*

When you're speaking to an irate customer who won't let you get a word in, politely interject with a statement of appreciation. Here's how I do it. *"Let me just stop you for one second...Thank you. Thank you for taking the time to give me feedback that will help me meet your expectations and improve service for other customers. Now, you go on. I just wanted to let you know I*

*appreciate your feedback."* How do you think customers respond to a statement like this? Typically, they are speechless and they ALWAYS calm down.

## **8. Listen with the intent to understand**

Allow the customer time to vent and while they vent, really listen with the intent to understand how the problem they have experienced has affected them. Has the customer experienced embarrassment, inconvenience, or a loss of money or time as a result of this problem? Work hard to uncover the root problem with your listening skills. Your objective is to listen to the customer with the intent to understand their viewpoint before making them understand you.

## **9. Make your voice naturally authoritative**

A lower pitched, well-paced voice is perceived to be more knowledgeable, in control, and authoritative than a higher pitched voice. Try to avoid speaking loudly or in a higher pitched voice. Keeping your voice naturally authoritative creates calm and puts you in control.

## **10. Apologize**

In a recent consumer survey, 50% of customers who voiced

complaints to an organization said they never received an apology. If your company is wrong, admit it quickly and emphatically. This will help you disarm your angry customer and reduce defensiveness. I also encourage customer service professionals to apologize even when they are not at fault. An apology does not have to be an admission of fault. It can be offered to express regret. For example, *“I’m so sorry for any inconvenience this misunderstanding has caused you.”*

The next time you find yourself the target of verbal abuse, deploy these field-tested techniques and you’ll create calm, maintain control, and be much more effective.

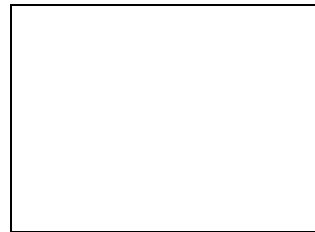
### **Take the next step in learning how to deal with demanding, irate, and unreasonable customers**

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this course to your employees’ desktop through our online video program or bring it in-house. [Get the full story here.](#)

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### **About the Author**

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