

5 GOLDEN RULES FOR HANDLING CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS

BY BILL HOGG

Most employees hate complaints. They don't like having to deal with customers who call or visit their store or office with a complaint. What they don't understand is that a complaint is actually a positive thing. You can't always meet every customer's expectations.

The ones who don't complain and simply never return are the ones to worry about. When a customer complains, it means they care enough that they would like to use your business again **if** their immediate concern can be resolved.

Here are 5 golden rules for handling customer service complaints.

Offer A Sincere Apology

It doesn't matter whether it's you or someone else at fault or if nobody is to blame. An apology demonstrates to the customer that you're taking ownership of the problem and are willing to try and help resolve whatever complaint they have. Don't blame someone else, even if it's not your fault. You're a representative of the company you work for and that's all the customer sees at that moment in time.

Ask And Then Listen

This is perhaps the single most misunderstood part of the whole complaint resolution process. Customers face staff that don't really listen all the time -- they simply wait for their turn to speak. Prove that your company is different to the rest and actually listen. Start by asking the simple question, "Would you please tell me exactly what the concern is and then I will see if I can do something about it?"

Once you have done this, don't do anything else. Regardless of whether it's a face-to-face business or a phone call, close your mouth, open your ears and listen to everything the customer has to say. They may be angry and need to vent but remember that it's not personal. Ask for permission to make notes if that will help, but don't do anything else except focus solely on the customer and their issue.

Once they have told you the problem, ask any questions you may have, to ensure you fully understand the problem. Get them to repeat any details if you need to and make notes that will help you investigate the problem fully.

Ask What Outcome They Expect As A Result Of Their Complaint

Some customers have specific demands related to their complaint. Others won't know exactly what they want but they know that something has to be done. Some simply want to vent. Once you have this information, advise them if it's something you can do for them right now or if they will have to wait.

If you're in a retail shop or office, they may have to sit and wait while you look into the problem and find a resolution. If it's a phone complaint, ask if you can call them back once you have a solution for them so they don't have to wait on the phone for an undetermined amount of time. Also, let them know when you will call them back -- then honour that commitment.

187 Willow Farm Lane
Aurora, Ontario L4G 6K5
(905) 841-3191
bill@billhogg.ca
www.billhogg.ca



BILL
HOGG
& ASSOCIATES

Take Ownership Of The Problem

Take responsibility for investigating and solving the customer's problem. This may entail you speak to another staff member if they were responsible or have more details. You may need to seek help from a manager if you don't have the answers and don't know how to find them yourself. Generally there are company guidelines for solving complaints and so you should be able to follow standard procedures.

Get Back To The Customer

Regardless of what you discover as a result of your investigation; get back to the customer in the time you promised. The resolution may be that a product is repaired or replaced. A service may have to be changed or perhaps a discount or refund is required. No matter what the situation is, it's a vital part of the process that you communicate with the customer and tell them what will be done.

There are times when a problem is beyond anyone's scope to rectify. You may not be to blame but the customer may still see it that way. The key is that you respond and give them whatever information you can.

Customer service complaints give you the opportunity to rectify problems and ensure they don't happen again. They can be learning experiences and if handled properly, not only will you retain the customer's loyalty, but you will build a more loyal customer than one you simply satisfied.

Performance Excelerator™ | Leadership Expert | Professional Speaker

*Bill is recognized as the **Performance Excelerator™** because of his uncanny ability to create profound change and deliver extraordinary results with the most demanding organizations. He works with senior leaders to inspire and develop high-performance teams that deliver exceptional customer service, higher productivity and improve profits.*

Bill is passionate about results and works only with clients who share that passion -- ready to take steps to achieve immediate, significant and continuous improvement. Whether working with boards or operations teams and employees, his no-excuse approach breaks down the silos and gains consensus and clarity throughout the organization.

Bill Hogg provides dynamic keynote presentations, transformative workshops, and world class executive consulting.

For additional information email [bill \[at\] billhogg \[dot\] ca](mailto:bill@billhogg.ca) or visit us online at www.billhogg.ca where you can sign up to receive an article like this each month or download [Bill's 1-sheet](#).

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