

Problem-Solving 101: Getting to the Bottom of Service Breakdowns **©copyright by Robert (Bob) W. Lucas**

When customers have a complaint or an issue to be solved, they want solutions, not excuses. To ensure that you address customer needs effectively in these situations, you need to be effective at problem solving.

Before you begin to solve a customer's problem, consider the fact that he or she may not really want you to "solve" the problem. In some cases a person simply wants to vent frustration or be heard. This is where the empathetic listening you have read about will come in handy. In many cases, your customer will often have a solution in mind when he or she calls or comes in. Your role may be to simply listen and offer to facilitate the implementation of the suggested solution. In some situations, you may have to "plant a seed" by asking an open-ended question that suggests a solution. If the customer picks up on your "seed" and nourishes it, you still end up with an outcome to which he or she feels ownership. For example, assume a customer wants a product that you do not have in stock. Instead of saying, "I'm sorry, that item is out of stock," you could ask a question such as, "How do you think _____ would work as an alternative?" You have now subtly made a suggestion without saying, "You could use ____ instead; it does the same thing."

If you jointly resolve an issue, the customer feels ownership. Such ownership can help him or her feel that it is their decision and will more likely result in a satisfied customer.

The following are some key actions involved in that process.

Step 1: Identify the problem

Before you can decide on a course of action, you must first know the nature and scope of the issue you are facing. Often, the customer may not know how to explain his or her problem well, especially if he or she speaks English as a second language or has a communication-related disability. In such cases, it is up to you to do a little detective work and ask questions or review available information.

Begin your journey into problem solving by apologizing for any inconvenience you or your organization has caused. The customer likely wants someone to be responsible. A simple, "I'm sorry you were inconvenienced, how may I assist you?" coupled with some of the other techniques basic service steps can go a long way to mending the relationship. Take responsibility for the problem or concern, even if you didn't actually cause it. Remember that you represent the organization to the customer. Since you are representing the company, you are "chosen" to be responsible. Don't point fingers at other employees, policies, procedures, or other factors. It is also important to let the customer know that you are sincerely remorseful and will do whatever possible to quickly and effectively resolve the issue.

To learn as much about the issue as you can start by speaking directly to the customer, when possible. Collect any documentation or other background information available. Do this by asking questions in order to gather the information needed to help identify and resolve a customer's problem or concern. The only way to get the information you want is to ask the right questions. You might use a variety of question types you. The following are some examples.

Open-ended

This type of question is good for defining issues, clarifying understanding, gathering information and getting involvement. When asking open-ended questions phrase them in a manner that allows the customer to respond as he or she feels necessary. You are not making a decision or forcing a response as you can with other types of questions. You are providing a vehicle for sharing information. Help focus the customer's response by asking *specific* open-ended questions. Note the difference between the sample questions that follow.

- *Non-specific*: "How do you like this new product?"
- *Specific*: "What uses can you see for this new product?"

While the example (1) may yield a beneficial response, you have not asked for a specific, focused piece of information. On the other hand, example (2) will potentially get the same piece of information as (1), but gets the customer to think of specific applications. Thereby, you have created a perceived need and she or he may now buy your product or service.

Closed-ended questions

This type of question is sometimes valuable for getting a quick response, gaining minimal involvement, controlling the conversation, verifying information, and clarifying or confirming points.

For example:

"Mr. Ho, didn't you say your son would be the primary user of this product?" (Yes/No).

"Mrs. Lacata, how many times have you used our services?" (A specific number).

"Ms. Hyland, do you prefer the blue or yellow one?" (A choice between two items).

An important aspect of asking questions is to find out the customer's true concerns and solve his or her problems. Assume that a customer calls and says that he or she wants to return a television because it doesn't work. By asking questions, you may be able to help the person resolve the issue without the added expense of shipping or having a service technician make a visit to the customer. In the example of the television, you may ask for background information about the product, then ask some specific questions about the problem. Questions such as the following might be appropriate:

- *What model is it?*
- *What exactly is wrong?*
- *Does it have an antenna attached?*
- *Is there a remote control?*
- *Have you checked to see that the power cord is firmly attached?*
- *Have you tried using a different electrical outlet?*
- *If they are using a power strip, "Have you checked to make sure the power strip is turned on?"*

Step 2: Analyze the problem/issue

To effectively determine a course of action, you need as much information as possible and a thorough understanding of what you are dealing with. To get that data, requires the use active listening and a little investigative work. You may need to collect information from a variety of sources, such as sales receipts, correspondence, the customer, public records, the manufacturer, and organizational files.

In gathering data, you should also do a quick assessment of how serious the problem is. You may be hearing about one incident of a defective product or inefficient service. In fact, there may be many unspoken complaints. Also, look for patterns or trends in complaints.

Once you have collected information through questioning and from other sources, spend some time looking over what you have found. If time permits and you think it necessary or helpful (e.g. the customer is not standing in front of you or on the telephone) ask for the opinions of others (e.g. co-workers, team leader/supervisor, technical experts). Ultimately, what you are trying to do is determine alternatives available to you that will help satisfy the customer and resolve the issue.

Step 3: Identify alternatives

Let the customer know you are willing to work with him or her to find an acceptable resolution to the issue. Tell them what you can do, gain agreement, and then set about taking action.

Since you are just being brought into the situation when a customer notifies you of a problem or their dissatisfaction, you can offer an objective, outside perspective. Use this perspective to offer suggestions or viewpoints that the customer may not see or has overlooked. Additionally, make sure you consider various possibilities and alternatives when thinking about potential resolutions. Look out for the best interests of your customer and your organization. To do this, be willing to listen to the customer's suggestions and to "think out of the box" for ideas other than the ones that you and your organization typically use. Don't opt for convenience at the risk of customer satisfaction. If necessary, seek any necessary approval from higher authority to access other options (e.g. to make a special purchase of an alternate item from a manufacturer for the

customer, or to give a refund even though the timeframe for refunds has expired according to organizational policy).

Step 4: Evaluate alternatives

Once all the facts have been collected, look at your alternatives or possible options. Be careful not to let cost be the deciding factor. A little extra time and money spent to resolve an issue could save a customer and prevent recurring problems later. Consider the following factors in this evaluation process:

What is the most efficient way to resolve this issue?

Which are the most effective options for resolving this issue?

Which options are the most cost effective?

Will the options being considered resolve the issue and satisfy the customer?

Step 5: Make a decision

Based on the questions in Step 4, and any others you wish to use in evaluation, make a decision on what your course of action will be. To do this, ask the customer

"Which option would you prefer?"

This simple question now puts the customer into the decision making position and he or she feels empowered. It now becomes his or her choice and recurring problems may be avoided. If the customer's request is reasonable and possible, proceed and resolve the issue. If not, negotiate a different alternative.

Step 6: Monitor the Results

Once you make a decision, monitor the impact or results. Do not assume your customer is satisfied, especially if any negotiations occurred between the two of you.

You can monitor the situation with a follow-up call, asking if he or she needs anything else when you see him or her, or sending a written follow-up (e.g. thank you letter with query concerning satisfaction, service survey, or email).

If you determine that your customer is not satisfied or additional needs are present, go back to step 1 and start over.

SOURCE: Lucas, R.W., Customer Service Skills for Success, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY.

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