Difficult Customer Situations

Stew’s Rules
1) The customer is always right!
2) If the customer is ever wrong, reread rule #1!

Do Stew’s rules make any sense to you? What do they mean? Here’s another way of interpreting them—“Even if the customers are wrong, they are still the reason we exist!”

There is always a reason for the way customers behave. You just may not always know what it is. It may be that they are having a horrible day, and their mind is preoccupied by problems that have nothing to do with you or your business. You won’t always be able to figure it out completely. An old saying goes, “If we knew what was going on in the minds and hearts of others, we would never again criticize.”

It is possible, however, to categorize many different types of difficult customers. If you know which type you’re dealing with, you get a better idea of how to adjust your interactions with them.

First of all, there’s no such thing as a “typical” difficult customer. Difficult customers come in all shapes and sizes. And, no business is exempt from encountering them. Everyone is difficult at one time or another. Customers might be disagreeable, domineering/supervisor, suspicious, slow/methodical, or dishonest.

Your job is to handle these difficult customers effectively. Rise to the challenge, so they come back again and again. Every business needs returning customers to generate continuous profits. Get ready. Here they come!

Objectives

A Identify different types of difficult customers.
B Effectively handle different types of difficult customers.

Making Mad Glad
Disagreeable customers

Adam is a busboy at a restaurant. Sometimes, he encounters argumentative customers who seem to look for problems. For example, one time when Adam was clearing plates, a gentleman questioned why he was doing it. Adam was a bit bewildered when the customer sent him away twice—even though he was obviously finished eating.

Carey is a receptionist in a pediatrician’s office. During cold and flu season, it gets pretty busy. Most parents are fairly patient, but some think that their kids should be seen right away, regardless of who else is waiting. Carey must deal with impatient customers who show verbally and nonverbally that they do not want to wait.

Shawn enjoys helping customers choose computers in the electronics store where he works. He loves computers and knows a lot about them. Yet at times, Shawn encounters leave-me-alone customers. These types of customers do not want any assistance or advice, even though Shawn could relieve some of their confusion.

Liz works part-time in a tanning salon. She greets all her customers with a smile and a warm “hello.” But it’s Thursday afternoon, and here comes Miss Irritable/Moody. She’s Liz’s best friend one week and a real crab the next.

Tom has his dream summer job at the local marina. He fills customers’ tanks with gas and sells needed supplies. Tom is very helpful, and most folks are appreciative. Sometimes, however, he’s run out of stock in something a customer requests. Some customers are understanding, but others get frustrated and take it out on Tom personally. These insulting customers are rough and rude.

Kasie is a customer-service representative for an insurance agency that sells policies to medium-sized businesses. Sometimes, the owners and managers of these businesses are complaining customers. “The wording on this policy sounds too simple. Are you sure you’re giving me the coverage I need?” … “I can’t understand what I’m reading—it’s almost like you people enjoy this!” … “I’m probably getting overcharged, and I don’t even know it. I thought you people might be pulling this the last time, too!” Sometimes Kasie wonders, “Would anything make these customers happy?”

Domineering/Superior customers

Austin and Patrick are movers who deliver furniture. Moving heavy, bulky items is often tricky, sometimes requiring specific turning strategies. Austin and Patrick are careful—they plan ahead and do a great job, often earning big tips. But today, they’re dealing with a domineering/superior customer. He barks orders the entire time they’re delivering his king-sized mattress. “This way, boys… turn it down and left… no, no, wait… I did this in college… pay attention to my directions… I said down!... it’s the only way…”
How to handle disagreeable customers

Remember Adam, the busboy at the restaurant, who was dealing with the argumentative customer? Most busboys would try to avoid the situation, but not Adam. Remaining positive and pleasant, he respectfully asked his customer, “Would you like me to stop back in a few minutes, or do you want to call me when you’re ready?”

Guideline—Asking simple, polite questions with options keeps most situations under smooth control.

Remember Carey, who works in the doctor’s office trying to prioritize patients being seen? Carey begins her explanations by first agreeing with the impatient people. “I know how unpleasant it is for a child who’s not feeling well to wait. The doctors and nurses are very aware of that, too. We just want to make sure that the most urgent cases are being seen first. I appreciate your understanding. Thanks.”

Guideline—Agreeing first on common points goes a long way in handling situations with difficult customers.

Remember the customer in the electronics store who wanted Shawn to “leave me alone” with a computer purchase? Shawn made sure he didn’t hover around the customer. That would drive the customer even further away. He softly but confidently mentioned, “My name is Shawn. If I can answer any questions, I’ll be happy to… I’ll be over in the printer section.” Shawn knew that by not being pushy and by remaining within view of the shopper, if and when he was ready, the customer would approach him.

Guideline—Patience works wonders. Never press customers for sales or decisions.

Remember Miss Irritable/Moody at the tanning salon? Liz knew that someone like that can drain the energy right out of you, if you let that happen. Liz did not try to figure out why this customer was sometimes crabby. More importantly, she didn’t try to snap her out of it. Instead, Liz just concentrated on her own tasks and tried not to be offended or take it personally.

Guideline—Do your job well. Be consistent in your positive behavior. You’ll have a natural, calming effect on customers and fellow employees.

Positive Behavior