

Tips for Helping an Angry Customer

There are many reasons customers who phone in may be angry--ranging from being left on hold too long to a defective product or poor service. How phone reps handle them is the key to defusing this anger--and avoid aggravating the situation or even triggering what may then become a difficult call. Karen Leland and Keith Bailey, founders of Sausalito, Calif.-based International Association of Quality Service and co-authors of *Customer Service for Dummies* (IDG Books Worldwide), recommend these preventive measures:

1. Remain upbeat.

This means focusing on positives and projecting good intentions, while avoiding words such as "never." Show empathy for a customer's problems by saying something like: "I can understand how difficult this has been. Here's what I can do to help."

2. Be willing to serve.

Telling an unhappy customer "I don't know" only aggravates the situation. "I'll find out" works much better. So does "I'll call you back"--rather than putting the burden on the customer to initiate callback.

3. Project good vibes.

Keep foremost in mind that customers are the No. 1 priority. If a phone rep considers them a nuisance, this likely will show through in voice and manner.

4. Live up to a customer's best expectations.

Be sure that reps are attuned to meeting a customer's basic needs. These are: fairness; friendliness; understanding and empathy; control; options and alternatives; and information.

5. Provide conscientious follow-up.

Be sure to follow through as promised--checking details as promised and calling back with information promptly by the appointed date.

6. Don't be anonymous.

A rep should make it a first priority to provide his or her name, so that the customer has a point of reference--this is especially important if for some reason the customer's call becomes disconnected.