

PRO SHOP PROBLEMS

Getting a grip on gripes

Every pro shop has its share of customers, rightly or wrongly, who complain. In some circles they're dubbed as the "headache" customers.

These individuals bombard the golf businessman with petty complaints. Their complaints range and run the gamut from inferior merchandise to surly personnel to too-slow service. Frequently their complaints lack any merit whatsoever, or stem from flimsy or imaginary reasons.

Often the dissatisfaction of the complaint costs the club professional profitable sales in the ill-will they spread to relatives, friends or business associates.

More than ever, today's pro regards each customer as a precious commodity — an asset he can ill-afford to lose. No sure cure is available for these cantankerous customers. But common sense and logic, blended with diplomacy and tact, are usually successful in converting chronic grouches to satisfied customers.

The following are suggested remedies which if followed, can prove beneficial when dealing with customers who have gained unenviable reputations as "headache customers."

Keep your cool. There are some individuals who actually derive pleasure from harassing a pro. Despite this, they should not be verbally abused. Even if the customer's remarks cause you to become emotionally bothered.

If you're overworked and plagued by anxiety or outrage you'll find yourself a poor match for a displeased customer. Handled with "cool," you'll find most likely he'll fumble his way through responses and perhaps even bypass an opportunity for a reasonable rebuttal. In fact, he is likely to err in his analysis of a complaint.

Urge the miffed customer to air his full complaint. Many customers will reveal only portions of their

grievances. They may feel you'll be inattentive to a lengthy complaint, or you'll be too pressed for time to really listen to them. Try to dispel these thoughts for unless you can accurately determine the dimensions of the complaint, you're not going to be able to really come up with a solution. Showing your concern with a complaint will impress a customer favorably and the full information you've gathered will aid you in understanding and resolving the complaint.

Don't abruptly terminate your customer's complaint. A customer may become abusive and unreasonable, but this is because he honestly believes he is right and has a need to display his feelings. He is likely to resent any interruption from you, even though you offer a valid reason for ending the discussion. To your loss, he may voice that resentment at a later date. Should you be obliged to leave unexpectedly, tender your apologies for the break and assure the customer you'll get back to him as promptly as possible.

Never make light of a complaint. Customers with complaints are rarely receptive to humor. They're often convinced you intend to "rip them off." A jest or carefree manner, no matter how bland, could ignite an outburst of anger. The only appropriate time for jollity on such occasions is after the complaint has been fully resolved to the customer's satisfaction.

Ask the customer for suggestions to upgrade your service. Such strategy places the customer on the defensive and gives him a feeling of importance. Plain and simple you'll be seeking an answer to the problems which he has raised. In fact, you're indicating you respect his judgment and may adopt his plans. More important, the customer is receiving assurance you are genuinely interested in his complaint and you're not just going to listen and then ignore it.

Avoid assuming the defensive.

Frequently the customer will relish such a reaction. Be tactful, be polite so you don't have to assume a defensive attitude which might be taken for indifference. Thus you won't forfeit command of the situation. Yet, you're offering the complainant an opportunity to renew his criticism of your business.

Assume all complaints have some validity. Complaints aren't always voiced by "soreheads" or unreasonable individuals. Perhaps the customer has registered a "crank" complaint in the past. This is no reason to assume there is no basis for his latest complaint.

For instance, a customer may have detected an obscure flaw in one of your more popular items. Sales of other items in the identical lot could produce additional complaints and possible loss of valued patronage. Taking note of his complaint can avoid problems in the future and your listening might very well yield dividends.

Don't be evasive and try a cover up. The customer will most likely be impressed by your forthrightness and this will lessen his indignation. He'll at least depart with a more favorable opinion of your establishment.

Keeping complaints under control can often be the key to a more successful business. Proper relations with a protesting customer stands hand in hand with the priority of sound merchandising practices, good employee relations and astute sales promotion. Adequate attention to this phase of your shop business can yield dividends through improved sales, keeping present customers and gaining new ones.

The dissatisfied customer, inevitable, sometimes unnerving, yet necessary for providing quality goods and services for your club. GOLFDOM recently asked club pros around the country how they handle merchandise complaints in their pro shops and turn these into

satisfied customers. Here's what they said:

Bill Hagensick, pro at Riverside Country Club in Menominee, Mich., receives most complaints about clubs and clothing. His policy is simple. "You try to have a reputation to take anything back that's bad," he notes. "If they know you stand behind the merchandise, they'll come back." He often exchanges items and has a flexible attitude about returns. "Whatever the manufacturer says to do, I do for them." He tries to give half off discounts for clothing which is soiled, has a small hole or a thread pulled, and replaces older clothing returned later in the season. He's been the pro at Riverside for eight years and grosses about \$30,000 for the 325 member club.

W. S. "Sid" Fritter, pro at McMinnville (Tenn.) Country Club, handles complaints in clothing, golf bags and woods, torn bags and inconsistent glove and clothing sizes. He replaces damaged equipment "if it happens through no fault of their own. If I sold a shirt and it had a tear in it, I'd turn around and replace it."

For Fritter and most pros, manufacturer dictates are the usual guidelines. "The membership will want to wait a week or 10 days to see what the manufacturer will do," he says. "Sometimes I just ship them off and they ship one over. If the manufacturers won't do anything, I'll replace it. It isn't that costly. I don't think I lost more than \$300 to \$400 in six months." His private club has 280 members. He's been pro since 1971.

Women's hats, gloves and skirts are the biggest complaints at the 400 member private, Greenhurst Country Club in Auburn, Ind. The club deals heavily in gloves, bags and hardgoods. When a complaint arises, "the only thing to do is to order what they want," Ira McLain, assistant to pro Jerry Brubaker, says. "They're usually very patient."

Brubaker says the club works well with its manufacturers and has never had to switch lines because of the volume of complaints. "I don't get complaints as much as suggestions about buying more expensive merchandise," he notes. "You just

offer as much as possible on your budget."

As McLain and Hagensick stress, satisfying the customer is essential even though problems sometimes lie beyond the pro's control. Months may pass before a club or replaced item is sent from the manufacturer. "They repair it but it's a nuisance to keep sending it in," Hagensick explains. Add to that the aggravations of insurance costs and postage charges to and from the manufacturers. Some shops also deal with specific playing seasons and seasonal changes requiring a rotation of stock and shorter marketing period. Discounts and sales may help here.

Resort and municipal courses have their share of complaint difficulties, too. Harold Firstman, pro and manager of Laguna Seca Golf Course, a privately owned public resort in Monterey, Calif., grosses over \$40,000 in basic "tourist" pro shop items such as hats, caps, gloves and sweaters and loses only about \$100 annually to complaints. Often complaints relate to the cracking of man-made materials in shoes.

His low loss figure may stem from his issuing cash refunds, customer credit or replacing items immediately. Clubs are repaired locally by returning them to an authorized manufacturer's representative.

Firstman offers no discounts or specialties but he is careful to inspect merchandise well. "My professionals are continually displaying, arranging and rearranging merchandise," he says.

Despite his successes, he says his gross volume is cramped by outside competition of municipal golf and discount merchandising at stores. Less expensive golf clubs at San Jose makes it "very hard to make a profit of 40 percent on clubs sold." The lure of cheaper prices and special sales of well known clubs and balls offsets discounts for many clubs as well as municipal courses. Jack Murphy knows. He's assistant to pro Sam Videtta at Colonial Country Club, a public club in Lynnfield, Mass.

"As far as I know, we've had no complaints as far as inferior merchandise," Jack notes of the service to some 250 daily golfers. "Any time we get a complaint, we make it

good. Everything is very happy. I think the only complaint is the local store is getting the same merchandise and selling cheaper. We sell balls at \$16 a dozen and they sell them at \$11. We can't discount it." Like Firstman's shop, Videtta offers no discounts.

Similar outside competition has hit Fritter at McMinnville, but he helps his membership "because they have nowhere else to go" with their complaints.

But handling competition and complaints isn't entirely beyond a pro shop. Some problems may be headed off from the start. A pro can save time and money by examining new merchandise and periodically checking it. Often articles are quickly replaced if reported flawed or damaged within five days of their arrival.

Returned equipment may be renewed equipment. Fritter sometimes forms a new set of clubs from replacements and sells them as a package to membership or municipal courses. Handling repairs at the club or a nearby shop is also ideal for cutting costs and delays.

One club which apparently uses these principals to great advantage is the Arizona Country Club, Phoenix, headed by Gene Lesch.

Complaints at the 500 member, private club, often involve club repair and softgoods, but color, material or size are seldom a problem, according to assistant Jerry Witmer.

The club also employs an expert consultant saleslady and has a hemming and alteration service for membership. Instead of finding customers abusing these services, the club reports profit. "We have a minimal amount of loss this way. The only thing they have to do is take it home and hang it up," says Witmer.

Of course, attitude is important in dealing with customers. As Witmer states, "In a complaint, you're going to do whatever the membership wants. You absorb the costs. Listen to what he says. You don't want to be negative."

After all, customers are telling something, something that is vital. A complaint solved is the start to an understanding and better business. □