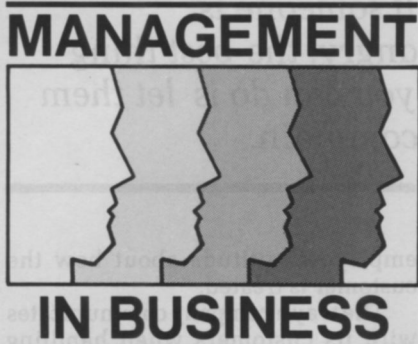


# HANDLING CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS

Every service business needs a cool-headed, well-spoken person to appease the occasional irate customer.

by Rudd McGary, Ph.D.



**M**ore and more, the way a company handles complaints is becoming a major issue for the consumer.

From the customer's viewpoint, there are several companies in your market area that are capable of delivering the services they require. If you can't do it, they'll find someone who will. Consequently, as long as prices remain competitive, the company ultimately chosen by the consumer is the one that communicates best, and is probably the one with the highest profitability and growth rate, too!

How a company handles complaints often plays a major part in the customer communication process. Therefore, it's important for your company to consider three areas when formulating a successful complaint response program.

## Office mechanisms

First, there are office mechanisms that need to be in place in order to make sure complaints are handled effectively. Second, certain techniques need to be used by the people who are actually going to handle these complaints. Finally, it's important that employees' attitudes reflect a spirit of cooperation—not confrontation.

It is always best if one person handles complaint calls. This person has to be good on the phone, with an ability to listen to angry people without

responding in kind, and to direct complaints to the correct person or department.

If there's no way you can route complaint calls through just one person, use several—but don't have everyone in the office taking these calls. Some people are simply better at it than others.

## Logging complaints

Make sure all complaint calls are logged. Put in the date of the call, who took it, and most importantly, what was done about it.

This complaint response system should allow you to track the handling of the complaint. A quick glance at the log book should reveal when and why the complaint was made, who handled it and how.

Today's customer isn't satisfied by simply talking with your office. Action must occur that helps rectify the perceived problem.

After you're sure that someone has responded to the complaint, it's a good idea to call the customer a few days later to make sure they're satisfied with the company's actions. Most companies don't do this, which is why yours should.

## Your technique

If someone is angry, the best possible thing you can do is let them air their complaint. Give them the opportunity to express themselves without interruption.

It's often hard to let someone ramble on when you have the solution to the problem. However, it's important to remember that the caller wants to make sure you understand why they're calling.

The receiver of the complaint should take notes about the nature of the complaint. This will help make the log book as thorough as possible.

Always restate the complaint to make sure that you have heard it correctly. This helps you to focus on the

problem and lets the person know that the complaint has been heard.

## Making peace

After carefully listening to and logging the complaint, it's time to offer the customer a solution. This solution must have a tangible start. For example, don't simply say, "Someone will get back to you." Instead, give them something more concrete such as, "The crew chief will be back to you by 4:30 this afternoon."

By using people's titles and a definite response time, the consumer will regard your efforts as more sincere.

Conclude the conversation by asking if there is anything else that can be done. In some cases the person calling is so obnoxious it's impossible to deal

---

*Customers aren't always right, but they always think they are.*

---

with the complaint. But in most cases the caller will be fairly easy to talk to, especially after you've completed the above steps.

## Employee attitude

Customers aren't always right, but they always think they are. Make sure you understand that perspective and remember that whatever their complaint is, it is a valid one.

Often you'll find that allowing customers to complain will itself get rid of the problem. The key is understanding that customers wouldn't call with a complaint unless they felt it was legitimate.

Keep in mind that the customer isn't angry with you personally, but with something that happened. This may be difficult when there is a really

# ON-THE-SPOT COVERAGE.

## Lebanon Turf Fungicide with **BAYLETON® 1G**

If you're looking for economical control of dollar spot and other turf diseases, use Lebanon Turf Fungicide with Bayleton 1G. Bayleton provides preventative and curative control of dollar spot, anthracnose, powdery mildew, red thread, rusts, brown patch, fusarium blight and snow molds. Formulated on a granular cob base for easy spreading, Bayleton works systemically to fight and control disease. And the long-lasting residual action of Bayleton makes it one of the most effective products on the market. From the source for premium quality turf products—your local Lebanon distributor.

**Lebanon**  
TOTAL TURF CARE

A division of Lebanon Chemical Corporation

800-233-0628

BAYLETON® is a Registered Trademark of  
Bayer AG, Germany for triadimefon.

Circle No. 126  
on Reader  
Inquiry Card

obnoxious person on the phone, but it's important. If necessary, keep repeating it to yourself while talking with them.

Your attitude should acknowledge that the customer is the only reason you are in business. It doesn't make dealing with obnoxious or surly people any easier, but if you do a good job, most people will respond in kind.

### **Customer as king**

The understanding that the customer is the key to a successful business should be the cornerstone of every

---

*If someone is  
angry, the best thing  
you can do is let them  
complain.*

---

employees' attitude about how the customer is treated.

The way a company communicates with its customers when handling problem or complaint calls may determine whether or not the customer remains a customer.

It's extremely important to let everyone in the organization know what is expected, how to do it, and who is responsible for the handling of customer complaints.

Many companies excel technically but fail to communicate effectively. By taking the initiative in complaint response, you can keep even unhappy customers happy. **LM**



Rudd McGary, Ph.D., is a senior consultant with All-Green Management Associates in Columbus, Ohio.