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Customers from Hell

Five dos and don'ts for calming cranky customers

By Jeff Mowatt

Perhaps you've noticed that customers are becoming increasingly hostile. Case in point was the highly publicized incident where a patron in a fast food restaurant became so enraged that he attacked the restaurant manager. The customer spilled his coffee on his breakfast and when the manager refused to replace the meal, the ensuing argument led to violence that ended with the customer being arrested.

It seems in our fast-paced frenetic world customers are now more tired, rushed, stressed and downright fed up. That's why in my customer service seminars both managers and front-line employees frequently ask me how to handle the proverbial customer from hell. Here are five dos and don'ts for calming cranky customers.

1. Do consider the big picture Don't focus on the single transaction

The fast food fisticuff could have been avoided if the restaurant manager (better yet the front-line employee) would have cheerfully replaced the patron's meal for free. The incremental cost to the restaurant would have been nominal, and the loyalty and subsequent return on investment would have been substantial. Instead, the manager took the low road and focused on the cost of the meal and the



When a customer has a problem and you need the pertinent details, ask the four Ws: who, what, where and when. But avoid asking why.

2. Do acknowledge feelings Don't say "calm down" ever

Can you think of a single example in the history of the world when telling somebody to "calm down" did anything other than make things worse? Me neither. It's never appropriate to tell someone how they should feel. On the contrary, you'll improve their demeanour by validating their feelings with empathic statements like, "That sounds frustrating."

3. Do ask the four Ws Don't ask "why"

When a customer has a problem and you need the pertinent details, ask the

is that someone was inept. Imagine asking a customer, "Why didn't you read the instructions?" This is not constructive and just makes things worse.

4. Do apologize for foul-ups Don't over explain

Over the 20 years that I've written and delivered customized customer service seminars, I've discovered that the main reason customers become irritated is simple – the organization broke a promise; one that was either expressed or implied. Telling a customer, "I'll call you back," then neglecting to do so is called lying. If we normally complete a