

January 2000 \$4.00

FOODSERVICE

and Hospitality

CANADA'S HOSPITALITY BUSINESS MAGAZINE

working SMARTER

Keeping Customers When Things Go Wrong

In the first of a series of columns, JEFF MOWATT offers five keys to turning upset customers into fans

When it comes to dealing with dissatisfied customers, most business owners and managers believe that money-back guarantees and/or exchange policies will fix any situation. But while these strategies may fix the immediate problem, they do nothing to fix the relationship. After all, policies don't fix relationships — people do. The fact is that most businesses pay little attention to how employees can fix a damaged relationship when a customer has been let down. But the consequences can be staggering. Inadequately trained front-line employees can chase away repeat customers and referrals, spread damaging word-of-mouth advertising, and become frustrated and de-motivated because they're constantly dealing with upset customers. However, by applying a few critical people skills, front-line employees can create such positive feelings — for both themselves and their customers — that an upset customer will ultimately become a loyal patron and an advocate of your business. Here are five key strategies:

1. Focus on Concerns Instead of Complaints

No one likes to hear customers complain, and employees often become impatient and defensive when faced with these "trouble-makers." To prevent this defensive mind-set, employees must be trained to treat customer complaints as concerns. They should also be made to understand that customers who express concerns are helping the business stay sharp, competitive and successful. Focusing on customer concerns instead of complaints will immediately shift a potentially negative situation to one that is positive, helpful and productive.

2. Empower Front-line Employees

You can often prevent customers from becoming upset if you empower front-line employees to make reasonable, on-the-spot decisions. This type of delegation requires two important factors: training and trust. The irony is that many managers say they can't afford to train employees, when in fact they can't afford not to. After all, you don't get customers for free — you earn customers by investing in front-line training.

3. Prove that You're Listening

When a customer voices dissatisfaction, stop whatever you're doing, turn towards them and give them an expression of total concern. Listen without interrupting, then prove that you've heard them. That means repeating and paraphrasing their concerns, while telling them why you're repeating what they've told you. For example, you might say "I want to make sure I've got this straight..." This ensures that the customer knows you truly understand the problem.

4. Express Sincere Empathy

Almost every upset customer feels frustrated that they didn't get the service or product they expected. Whether or not they have a valid reason for feeling that way is irrelevant. Upset customers need to know you care — not just about their problem, but also about their frustration. Your empathy is something no refund or exchange will ever equal, so use phrases such as, "I'd feel the same way if I were you."

5. Apologize and Provide Extras

Apologize to the customer, even if it wasn't your fault. After all, you represent your organization to that customer, so apologize on behalf of the entire company. Even when you suspect the customer may have erred, it's better to give them the benefit of the doubt than to be "right" and lose a lifetime of repeat and spin-off business. If your product or service really did fall short of the mark, give them a refund or exchange, as well as something for their inconvenience. Any small gesture or token of appreciation will be greatly appreciated, and will transform that upset customer into one of your greatest advocates. ☐

Many managers say they
can't afford to train
employees, when in fact
they can't afford not to



Author of several self-study training systems, Calgary-based Jeff Mowatt speaks at conventions and for corporations on how to delight customers and co-workers without working harder. He can be contacted at 1-800-jmowatt, or e-mail to jmowatt@ibm.net