

CRM Fear Factor

When Is It OK To Say No to a Customer?

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A car rental customer notices a minor scratch on the car before returning it. He does not mention this incident when he turns it in and tries to hide the scratch. The rental agent makes a very detailed inspection of the car, finds the scratch and tells the customer that the car must be taken in for repair, for which he'll be charged.

The customer gets furious and complains about the bad service and emphasizes the irrelevance of the little scratch.

What should the agent do?

If she caves in and does not charge the customer for the scratch, she violates her company's rules and the agency's insurance company's rules. She also sends the wrong message to the customer. But if she stands firm, she risks sending away an angry customer, losing his business and, potentially, that of everyone shares his experience with.

More than once I have heard people complain that "the customer is *not* always right"; "the customer is our enemy"; or "CRM is not for all customers." And to some extent, I have to admit that these statements are not always incorrect.

Back in the early days of CRM, thought leadership analyzed the behavior of "customer advocates" and "customer terrorists." Customer advocates were those who were in love with their favorite product and its manufacturing company, and they were very easy to please and retain. Customer terrorists, on the other hand, were those who liked to complain and, in so doing, were able to get more commercial attention, such as discounts and compensation. They seemed to go out of their way to complain. They loved the product but made as much of companies' tendency to placate customers as they could. For the most part, they were loyal customers, but they wanted to be rewarded for that loyalty.

An experienced customer service representative who has dealt with all kinds of complaints and complainers is able to distinguish the advocates from the terrorists.

When a representative notices that he or she is dealing with a *customer* terrorist, there are two levels of communication techniques that are critical to keep the customer while denying the customer's request or complaint.

Content of a request or complaint

It is very important to summarize the content of the request/complaint the customer has stated without evaluating it. This means pure repetition of what has been said. Once the rep has done this, he or she should follow these rules:

- 1) Stay calm and maintain a professional attitude. Focus on *what* is being said and not on *how* it's being said.
- 2) Stress the facts in the request or complaint that are not the company's responsibility.
- 3) Don't ever interrupt the customer. He's waiting for a chance to say, "Let me talk, please," or, "Listen to me first, please," to provoke you to defend or justify yourself and the company you represent. You should not give him the opportunity to act like this.
- 4) Focus on the facts in a polite and explanatory manner. Do not take a confrontational, "we are right" ("you are wrong") approach.



Tone, gestures and voice of the communication

Independent of the customers' words, it's important to maintain emotional control. A representative needs to learn to separate pure content from human reaction. The CSR has to control the conversation and ignore negative and insulting comments. Here's what you do:

- 1) If the customer insults you, don't react in the same way. Try to put yourself in the customer's situation, distinguish the weak argument from the strong emotion. Imagine that you have a transparent shell around yourself that makes you immune to the customer.
- 2) Stay rational and content-focused.
- 3) Don't raise your voice, and keep your tone controlled.
- 4) Don't use negative gestures--even if you're on the phone. Surprisingly, the other party can tell when there's a discrepancy between what you're saying and your gestures.
- 5) It's OK to say no. But when you do, say it with a smile on your face!

The goal of these rules is simply to make the customer feel less assured of the validity of his complaint. The conversation does not have to be a long discussion; this is especially important for call-center agents.

Say no and keep your cool

With these rules in mind, consider the rental-car customer who returned the scratched vehicle. How should the agent handle the transaction?

The employee keeps calm and tells the customer that the agency's insurance company has clear rules that cannot be manipulated. It's not a major repair, but it has to be taken care of, nonetheless, to keep all the vehicles in the pool in good condition. Tell the customer that he, of course, will get a copy of the body shop bill as proof that he's not being cheated. He will be charged only for the damage caused by him--no extra hours for extra work. As the agent keeps calm and explains the issue, the customer can only argue on an emotional level--not based on the facts.

In the end, the customer pays for the repair and keeps his business with the rental company. Why? Because he really was charged only for the damage he caused. *And* he appreciated the sincerity and professionalism of the employee.

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