

Love Your Difficult Customers

Action Guide

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Introduction

John O'Hurley has certainly seen unhappy customers (and has been one from time to time). In your daily interactions, you will encounter difficult customers on occasion as well. It can be challenging, but there are ways to positively handle an angry customer who walks into your organization or calls you on the phone.

Trying to satisfy an unhappy customer can be difficult for even the most skilled service person. The exciting news is that there are solutions! In the *Love Your Difficult Customers* training program, John O'Hurley provides you with four simple steps to help you provide great service to difficult customers:

1. Take responsibility for your customers
2. Listen and confirm
3. Empathize with your customers
4. Empower your customers with options

The interesting thing about difficult, upset, or angry customers is that they represent your greatest opportunity. If you can solve their issues and really make them feel, well... *love*, then they will be truly loyal to your organization! In fact, they can become a loyal champion for your great customer service!

PREPARE YOUR AUDIENCE IN ADVANCE

Let's face it, helping a difficult or angry customer can be stressful. But, there's good news! This simple formula presented in this program will help you reduce your stress quickly and genuinely help your customer.

Before you begin training, it is helpful to get your attendees to reflect on their experiences with difficult customers. This process will allow each attendee to recall their experiences and put the lessons presented in the program into perspective. They will also be more receptive to the messages in this program. Finally, they will gain greater insight into how the four lessons in the program can be applied to your organization.

Questions for attendees in advanced of viewing the program:

Think about some of the difficult customers you have encountered. What were their problems? List the kinds of problems you have encountered with your customers below:

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Now think of your own experience when you were an angry customer. What could have helped make *you* less angry? List some of your ideas here:

ABOUT THE ACTION GUIDE AND THIS TRAINING PROGRAM

This training program includes one DVD with two separate training programs:

- Love Your Customers
- Love Your Difficult Customers

Each program has its own *Action Guide*. Each *Action Guide* includes a detailed summary of all the learning points found in the program. In addition, there are questions for discussion, suggestions for implementing the lessons, action steps and fun exercises designed to engage everyone in the training messages.

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Learning Point 1:

Take Responsibility

Often, when an angry customer approaches or calls with a problem, our first (and natural) reaction is to think, "It's not my fault!" In fact, it probably isn't your fault. However, in order to truly help your upset customer, you have to suppress this automatic reaction.

Taking responsibility means owning your customer's issues, no matter who's at fault. Remember, it is difficult to really listen to your customer when you are thinking, "It's not MY fault!"

When a customer brings an issue to your attention or asks for help, take personal responsibility on behalf of the company. Remember, when a customer is speaking to you, you are the company!

In the program, did you notice how all three employees started their scenes by wanting to argue?

- Kevin grows defensive when he's accused of not respecting his customers' time.
- Tanya is about to argue when her customer calls her a "banking idiot."
- Steve tries to avoid responsibility by saying, "I wasn't working last night."

If a customer is upset, arguing with them will only make things worse. They are not interested in excuses; they just want results. It may sound harsh, but it's true. When in doubt, put yourself in their place and ask, "If I were this person, how would I want this situation to be resolved?" Take responsibility, just do it!

If you **MUST** pass a customer along to a coworker or a different department, then taking responsibility means personally ensuring their needs are met. Before you transfer them to another department, offer them a simple option that will "wow" them in the world of endless transfers:

For example, when you are on the phone, you could say, *"If you don't find what you need please call me back anytime. My number is, (give them your direct line)."* You could also offer to send them an email with your contact information for their future reference. Earmark the email to follow-up with them in a week to ask if their problem has been resolved. This not only helps your angry customer, but it also helps build a relationship for future sales.

If you need to have another associate speak to your customer, take the time to walk them over to the other department. Let the customer know that you are still available after their interaction and that you would like to check back with them before they leave the store.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

As a consumer, when have you experienced a customer service professional who avoided **taking responsibility** for your situation or made excuses instead of providing solutions? How did it make you feel? Was their excuse enough of a reason to explain the situation? Write down some of your thoughts:

What does "taking responsibility" mean to you? Be specific about how you've **taken responsibility** in the past to meet a customer's needs?

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Learning Point 2:

Listen and Confirm

When a customer is angry, upset, or unhappy, you really need to actively listen in order to understand your customer. That means not just hearing the words but actually processing what they mean. That way, you can prepare real solutions to your customer's problems.

Many people confuse "hearing" with "listening". While hearing is a biological function, active listening is the result of purposeful behavior. Listening is something we choose to do and a skill we can perfect with practice. The first step in listening is to wait until the customer is finished, then confirm your understanding by repeating back what was just said.

People who are effective listeners are more helpful to their customers and tend to have a much greater level of influence over day-to-day situations. In fact, good listeners tend to achieve more in all aspects of their lives.

We all get distracted or have things going on that might keep us from being good listeners. Here are a few simple ideas that will keep you on track:

- Stop what you're doing and focus on the person speaking to you. Clear your mind and make eye contact. Use visualization to see their words in your mind.
- If someone is speaking too fast, ask him or her to slow down and let them know it's important that you really understand them.
- If you feel your mind drifting, gently refocus on their eyes, hear the sound of their voice and then what they're saying. Don't beat yourself up if you catch yourself drifting, because we all do it occasionally. Just gently refocus your attention.
- Try not to think about your response until the other person has finished speaking. Then take a moment and formulate your response. Don't be afraid to take notes! We encourage it!

- Next, use *questions* to get to the core of your customer's problem. Try to ask specific questions that will yield specific answers. Each question should go a little deeper, based on the customer's previous answer.
- Once you've received all the information your customer has to share, *confirm your understanding*, by restating what was just discussed. Have you left anything out? Forgotten anything? The importance of note taking becomes apparent when you want to confirm with your customer that you understand them. So, take notes! It's a good habit.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. Have you ever had your mind wander when you're listening? Can you think about what you did to refocus on the customer? If so, write down some of your ideas below and then share them with the group.

- 2. Review the key ideas behind active listening listed on pages 9 and 10. Discuss them with everyone in your group. Now list other ways in which you can improve your active listening skills.

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Learning Point 3:

Empathize

Dealing with difficult customers can be well, difficult. These surefire steps will help. But before you implement them, make sure you acknowledge your customers emotions because if you don't, you can spend a lot of time trying to help someone who isn't ready.

em·pa·thy (n) 1. The ability to identify with and understand another person's feelings or difficulties.

Empathy is the ability to acknowledge the customer's specific feelings and the specific reason or cause of those feelings.

Being empathetic is a key tool in dealing with all customers, but it is particularly useful when dealing with an upset customer. You don't have to agree with the customer's reasoning. You can use empathy to calm them down, and refocus everyone's energy to reach a solution.

Even though empathy is listed as the third learning point, it is really used throughout a customer service exchange. If a customer is upset at the beginning, you must acknowledge their emotions first. Otherwise you'll spend valuable time trying to help someone who is not ready to receive it.

Always acknowledge your customer's feelings before trying to solve their issues or work towards a solution.

The first step to empathy is to apologize to the customer (remember, you are the company in the customer's eyes) and let them know that you understand that "we've all been there." Perhaps the best way to do this is to reflect on your own experiences as a customer (unfortunately, we've all experienced examples of poor service).

Another powerful way to express empathy is through *empathy phrases*. These are specific sentences that acknowledge your customer's emotions (frustration, upset, anger) and identify the source of the emotion (product malfunction, service disruption, human error, etc). These phrases give you a way to apologize in a positive, proactive fashion.

Here are some basic rules for using empathy phrases:

- Avoid generalized statements like "I see what you're saying" or "I know where you're coming from." These phrases imply that you're not really paying attention. They can also sound insincere.
- Always mention your customer's specific issues and specific emotions. Make it personal and apologize in the first person singular; remember you are the company.

These phrases can also be a powerful way to move your customer towards a solution. Here are some examples of effective empathy phrases:

"I'm sorry you're telephone service has been disrupted Mr. Jones, obviously this is very frustrating for you."

"I apologize. It seems you're pretty upset by the delay"

"Obviously you're in a rush and frustrated. I'm sorry you had to wait so long for your food order."

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What is your first reaction when a customer approaches you (in person or on the phone) and is upset? Think about what is going on in your mind. What do you say to the customer? What are you thinking? List some of your reactions and thoughts below:

How can you be more empathetic? When you have been upset in the past, what worked best to calm you down? Think about your successful customer service experiences and write down all of the things that worked to convert you from an unhappy customer into a satisfied customer.

Do you have any specific empathy phrase you've used successfully? List some of the common empathy phrases you use below. Share your empathy statements with other members of your team.

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Learning Point 4:

Empower with Options

One of the key ways to resolve an issue is to **empower your customer with options**. Provide them with some choices to make. By letting them be a part of the decision making process, they feel more in control of the situation. You can also soften any situation by offering the customer something that isn't typically available to them.

Providing options does make a difference. Think about the options that Kevin, Tanya and Steve offered: Each of the solutions that they offered helped turn around an unhappy customer.

- In the grocery store, Kevin gives his customer the option of checking out at the pharmacy or if she has more shopping to do, to return to him and he'll help her right away. It's a nice way to end the transaction and reminds her that he cares about her time.
- In the bank, Tanya gives her customer the options of opening an additional business account. This helps him avoid the frequent security issues as well as brings the bank more potential business.
- At Gadget Guy's, Steve offers his vacuum obsessed customer the option of a refund, an exchange of equal value, or the chance to retrieve his items and repair the vacuum. In the last option, Steve offers complimentary service and a coupon for anything in the store. This solution not only creates a happy customer, it can lead to additional sales for the store.

So why is it important to provide options? The main reason is that your customer will feel like he or she has control over a frustrating situation. You are also showing that you care by being responsive and allowing the customer to have input into resolving the problem in the best fashion. It is a win-win situation.

Of course, allowing options requires that you understand the policies of your organization. What options are you able to offer? If you are unsure of your policies or of what options you can offer, discuss this in advance with your manager. That way, you'll be prepared to find the best solution possible.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. Describe some ways you can provide options for your customers that deliver a "win-win" for the customer and the company. This is also a good time to review the company's policies around refunds, warranties, exchanges, and product promotions.

- 2. How does having the latest up-to-date information about the products and services you provide influence the options you might be able to offer? List your observations below.

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3. Every organization has different options they can offer customers. List some of the options you can offer to a customer who might be dissatisfied. Share this list with others in your group. Perhaps you can come up with a master list of options to help customers.

4. There are times when you can't provide exactly what the customer wants. This can be frustrating and difficult. Discuss in your group how you can help these customers who want more. List some ideas below:

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Using This Program in a Training Session

Your Audiences

Helping customers who are upset, difficult, or angry can be a challenge. It requires the ingenuity of every individual. Often, it will require a team solution. For that reason, it is vital for everyone to be trained on these skills.

The lessons in "Love Your Difficult Customers" are a valuable tool for everyone within your organization:

MANAGEMENT AT ALL LEVELS: Often when a customer is upset, managers need to be involved in providing solutions. This video provides everyone in your organization with tools for solving customer problems, but managers will benefit from the program in several ways. First, it will show the team that management is committed to satisfying customers. It also will give everyone a simple and unified strategy for addressing customer concerns.

CUSTOMER CONTACT EMPLOYEES: Employees who have any contact with customers should see this program. Whether on the phone or interacting with customers in person, they will encounter difficult customers. This will give them the tools to better manage the situation. Remember, other employees in your organization become your customers when dealing with interdepartmental issues, so everyone is involved in customer contact.

ORGANIZATION-WIDE TRAINING: "Love Your Difficult Customers" has a simple and powerful approach that everyone in an organization can use. Many employees have interactions with customers. Security personnel, sales people, cleaning staff, managers, or financial personnel... they can all encounter angry customers and may be required to interact with them. This program will provide them with a set of skills for helping the customer and the company.

PREPARING THE TRAINING SETTING

View the program in advance of the training session at least once and review the key learning points in the program (listed in this workbook). Think about ways you can make the message work for your team and for your organization.

Arrange to have a DVD (or VHS) player and a monitor available for this training session. If you have more than 20 people attending, be sure to order at least a 25-inch monitor. Remember to encourage participation. The ideas presented here can trigger energetic responses, questions, and a host of good ideas. Getting everyone involved will help build enthusiasm for the message and will encourage audience members to feel that they share "ownership" of the solution.

- Obtain one guide for each participant.
- Test your equipment in advance and adjust color, sound, etc.
- Bring writing materials for each participant.

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SAMPLE TRAINING SESSION

This video and print package includes a number of ideas to help you motivate your team to deliver excellent customer service.

Below, we propose a format for a sample training session that will help you plan and conduct a course using *Love Your Difficult Customers*. You may want to modify these items to accommodate time constraints, intended audience needs, and training goals.

PRE-SCREENING PREPARATION. Welcome people to the training session and give them an overview of the program. You may want to address the concepts presented in this program in the context of your own organizational goals.

SCREENING. Show *Love Your Difficult Customers*. You can watch the program in its entirety or focus your training session on one or several of the learning points.

POST SCREENING DISCUSSION. Use the themes from the program listed below as a catalyst for discussion.

1. Take Responsibility
2. Listen and Communicate
3. Empathize
4. Empower with Options

Exercise 1:

"ONE WORD STORY"

PARTICIPANTS: This works well for groups of 5 to 15.

PURPOSE: *One Word Story* is a narrative improvisational exercise that teaches:

- how to stay in the moment
- concentration
- listening skills

This exercise is designed to be fun. It will serve as an icebreaker to get everyone in your group involved and engaged with each other and with the learning points in the video.

STEP ONE: Have the group sit in a circle so all the group members can see each other.

STEP TWO: The group leader begins a story, offering one word. The story goes around the circle several times with each player adding one word that will continue the story. The game forces the players to really listen to what is going on and the trick is to make the story make sense.

EXAMPLE:

Player 1: Dorothy
Player 2: was
Player 3: caught
Player 4: in
Player 5: the
Player 6: Twister
Player 7: so
Player 8: she
Player 9: decided

(full circle)

Player 1: it
Player 2: was
Player 3: best
Player 4: to
Player 5: head
Player 6: home

FOLLOW UP: Hopefully the group had a few laughs and the ice was broken. Did the story fall apart or did it make sense until the end? Discuss how the story progressed. How well did people listen to their team members? Was everyone able to maintain concentration? Repeat this exercise a few times and have different members of your group start the story.

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Exercise 2:

Do You Hear Me Now?

PARTICIPANTS: There are 2 participants - but the entire group is involved in this exercise.

PURPOSE: Do you hear me now is an improvisational-based exercise that teaches:

- a. active listening
- b. selective questioning
- c. confirmation
- d. creative improvisation

STEP ONE: Choose two players from the group. One plays the **employee**, the other, the **difficult customer**. Have the **employee** leave the room.

STEP TWO: The group then creates a fictional customer problem that will be acted out with the "employee." Be specific and draw from common customer problems that your organization faces.

STEP THREE: The group should give the customer a main issue and between 4-5 "sub issues" that need to be dealt with. For example, the main issue could be that their product is not functioning properly. The sub-issues are that there was no parking, the customer had to wait in line at the service desk, the sole of their shoe fell off in the parking lot and that they feel the product was overpriced to begin with because they were unaware that it was on sale.

STEP FOUR: Have the **employee** come back to the room. Start the discussion between the **difficult customer** and the **employee**. Allow everyone in the audience to take notes on how the conversation progresses and ask them to pay attention to what works and what doesn't work as the conversation progresses. The person playing the employee should be encouraged to use the four learning points.

NOTE: The game works best if the person who is playing the customer is emotional and gives a lot of extra information that has nothing to do with the real matter at hand. It's up to the employee to actively listen, take thorough notes and use selective questioning to drill down to the matter at hand.

STEP FIVE: Once the employee is satisfied they have all the relevant information they say, 'I hear you now"... and recite back the main issue and the 4-5 sub-issues. They confirm their understanding by asking, "have I got it all?" or "is this correct?" If they get it all right, the customer replies, "Congratulations! You hear me now!"

STEP SIX: In the larger group, discuss this interaction. What worked? What didn't? What suggestions do members of your group have to help solve the customer's problem?

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