

CUSTOMER SERVICE ESSENTIALS

HAVE A PLAN IN PLACE – AND KNOW YOURSELF

- How will you detach yourself from your own emotions and focus on the situation at hand? You don't necessarily know the other person's "story" or experiences (including past bad experiences), so it helps to be ready to keep judgement at bay. Put yourself in the other person's shoes.
- What do you know about yourself – your triggers, your own biases or experiences, your approach to stressful situations – that you can plan to manage to help you through the interaction, or otherwise be aware of?

START BY LISTENING

Listen actively to the complaint. Try to attend to the problem without already formulating an answer of justification in your mind. Reflect the complaint, or if you don't fully understand it, ask for more detail. ("Tell me a bit more about this, so that I can understand better.")

Let's see how this goes...*"I am angry because you hit my mailbox post with one of your plow trucks."* – *Instead of saying: "I understand, BUT these things happen in snowstorms..."* - This conversation will not end well, and you might risk a disgruntled customer who will spread the word about how he felt misunderstood to his friends and family members.

A better way to address this is to say: *"I am sorry that this happened to you. If I understand correctly, you are saying that one of our plow trucks hit your mailbox post in a recent snowstorm. I will forward this issue to my supervisor and will get back to you. What's a good number or email to reach you at?"*

GIVE THEM TIME TO TALK

Try not to interrupt or talk over the angry customer. Patience is a virtue in customer service settings. People need time to express how they feel. Be empathetic and make them feel like you are taking their complaint serious.

Do not try to promise to fix the situation, you might not be able to. The key is to make your customer feel heard and understood. As important, follow up if you are promising to follow up. Do this reliably and in a timely manner. The more time passes, the angrier someone might get.

Do not try to justify or contradict at this moment. The customer is venting and needs to be heard.

REMAIN CALM – YOUR SUPER-POWER!

Being on the receiving end of a complaint that might have nothing to do with you can get the calmest person worked up. But it is just that...The customer's (natural) anger response has nothing to do with YOU personally. This is the mantra you want to repeat in order to remain calm.

On the other hand, if the customer strikes out in a personal, rude or abusive tone, you don't need to tolerate that kind of behavior. Escalating this to your supervisor for additional support might be a good idea.

Or just calmly say *"I am happy to continue this conversation with you once you calmed down enough to not speak with me in this tone of voice. There is no need for name calling or foul language, I am here to help you."*

THANK YOU GOES A LONG WAY

It might be hard to do in certain situations but thank them for bringing a specific problem to your attention. You might have been unaware of this, and in the long run the customer voicing his or her concern will help you to approach problems proactively.

Thank them for their patience that they are granting you for the time you'll need to resolve this.

BE SINCERE AND SPECIFIC

When you are promising to circle back about an issue, please do it. Give them a timeline when they can expect to hear back from you. Highlighting the importance of the priority to resolve their issue might be a good tool to calm the angry customer.

If it's a user error or misunderstanding on their end, try to steer away from pointing this out to them. At some point you might have not communicated well enough how to use the system, how to apply for a permit or where to go for assistance. The customer's perception dictates the service experience.

COMMUNICATION REALLY IS KEY

If the issue is complex, and you need to pull in support of your supervisor, IT, etc., keep people updated on the steps you are taking and how you are planning to resolve the issue. It helps to "chunk down" a problem into bitesize solutions. Before you wrap up, clarify what next steps (or resolution if you've reached that) are, and be sure to be accountable to any follow-up or timeline for responding.

Acknowledgement:

This content was sourced from an article that Bettina Seitz wrote for the UNH T2 *Road Business Newsletter* Spring 2021 edition. We gratefully acknowledge her work on this publication.

UNH T2 is pleased to provide free and customized Technical Assistance to local road agencies on a variety of road maintenance and transportation infrastructure-related topics, including bridge preservation and maintenance activities. Please reach out to <mailto:t2.center@Unh.edu> for additional resources, support, or technical assistance, or visit <https://t2.unh.edu/>.

UNH Technology Transfer Center (UNH T2)

33 Academic Way Durham, NH 03824

<https://t2.unh.edu/>
t2.center@unh.edu

