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Dealing with Complaints

COMPLAINTS made by customers are a source of deep concern to management and of irritation to workers.

It is human nature to take offence at a complaint when it is known that everyone from the man or woman at the counter up to the general manager of the firm is striving mightily to see that no preventable cause for grievance is given. But the clumsy handling of one small customer complaint by some harassed or frightened clerk may upset the earnest efforts of the whole organization.

Complaints, which may be looked upon as the expression of dissatisfaction or a grievance or something that disturbs a person, are to be taken seriously. Do not let their apparent smallness, from your point of view, cause you to deal with complaints in an off-hand way. The grievance which may be almost invisible to you looms large in the complainant's eyes. Even if an error can be corrected by nothing more than a little clerical dexterity, do not make it appear petty. Do it in the spirit of attentive service.

Nine times out of ten an injury is exaggerated. Often it is imaginary. Sometimes it is fabricated. Nevertheless it must be handled in the best way in the interest of your firm.

Why worry, some may say, about the occasional complaint when the great majority of customers says nothing? But just as nine-tenths of an iceberg lies under the surface of the sea, so this complaint may be a signal that there is much trouble at hand, though unseen.

Smallness of a customer's business is not a good reason for brushing off his complaint. Everyone who does business with your company feels that his affairs are important, and he is right. Careful handling of his complaint will build loyal support for you, and that is excellent business building.

Preventing complaints

Established customers are a firm's best friends. The most effective way to keep them is to give them no cause for complaint, to establish your firm on that

foundation stone of respect and confidence which is best described by the word "dependability".

The ideal way to handle complaints is to prevent things from happening that give rise to grievances, to be careful to give no grounds for a justifiable cause of distress. By thinking of the interest of the customer — a key principle in all business — you are safeguarding also your firm's interests.

Even if you were perfect, you would still receive complaints, but the nearer to perfection your work is the fewer will be the criticisms, and the better qualified you will be to deal with them.

Every worker should know the drill pertaining to his own job, but he should know more than is absolutely necessary to his daily work. By understanding the policies of his company and the connection of his department with others, he is able to relate things, to get them into perspective, and this helps enormously in handling problems.

He should also learn about customers' wants and expectations. Satisfied customers are the backbone of business success, but how can we satisfy them unless we know what they want?

It is true that people who have a high regard for your firm are likely to be patient, but their long-suffering is not the sort of thing on which to count for future trade or word-of-mouth promotion of your company's goods or services.

Try to sense, before he reaches the point of making a complaint, when a customer is dissatisfied. It is not enough to assure yourself that you are pursuing a course beneficial to your customer: you need to make it evident to him. Every contact with the customer should make it clear that he is the central figure.

Even in this age of thought manipulation there are many old-fashioned people who believe that the best way to keep old customers and win new customers is to give value for money, intelligent service, and personal attention.

What a customer notices most is not your normal efficiency, which he takes for granted, but the extra touch which demonstrates your understanding of him,

your genuine interest in his affairs, your willingness to do what is best for him, and your knowledge of how it can be done.

This extra touch is not a uniform put on for the occasion of serving customers, but is your personality, made up of many qualities: sincerity, the Golden Rule, knowledge, and developed skill. Some people confuse mere geniality — the “glad hand” approach — with personality. The smile with which a customer is greeted must spring from the worker’s knowledge of the service he is in a position to give, confidence in the integrity of his firm, and a feeling of pleasure because he is able to help. Customers who are treated in this way are unlikely to find cause for complaint.

Complaints are valuable

When complaints are made, they give you a chance for constructive business building. This is not just a sugar-coated way of describing a job that is generally held in disrespect. It is wholly true. There is no more satisfying experience than to turn a discontented customer into one who is made happy by your attention, care and friendliness. Every complaint, of whatever kind, can be handled so as to strengthen the goodwill between the customer and your company.

Complaints are valuable because they direct attention to possible areas of improvement in operating efficiency. Accept it as a basic law of business life that there is always room for improvement. A weak spot in your organization may be revealed by a complaint, and this gives you the opportunity to improve your product, your service and your public image. For these reasons, complaints are welcomed by all but the most timid of men.

We might go a step further and seek to uncover grievances. When not given expression, dissatisfactions will build up to the point of explosion. The principle of stepping out to meet trouble rather than allowing it to gorge itself in secret, pays dividends. When a customer sees that you are making efforts to discover and rectify conditions that annoy him, he will come over to your side.

About covering up

Too many people on all levels of operation in offices, stores and factories run into an internal block when shown an error: they buck and twist in an effort to avoid admitting it.

When a complaint is laid on your desk take it calmly, get the facts into the open, and look at them judiciously. No customer must ever be brushed off, stamped on, or made to feel ridiculous. Flippancy is quite out of place. The customer is not going to be satisfied if you tell him “To err is human” and attempt to pass off his criticism with a shrug.

Dodges and devices reveal their spurious nature. If you take cover behind such ambiguities as “company policy” or “our customary methods” you irritate your

customer. He doesn’t care about these obscure things: what he wants to know is whether you are going to do something about his grievance.

If you slipped up, or your firm made a mistake, a straightforward apology is in order. Don’t hesitate to express regret without any hemming or hawing. Then make an adjustment quickly, tactfully, and in a friendly way. An adjustment made grudgingly might almost as well not have been made at all, because a very important object of the adjustment is to retain the customer’s goodwill, and deepen it if possible.

This is widely recognized, and it is practised by most of the biggest concerns. Aboard a trans-Atlantic liner, a passenger crunched down on a metal staple in her vegetable plate. The waiter called the steward, who brought a gold-braided officer who apologized. He ordered a steak dinner for all six passengers at the table, turning a troublesome incident which could have produced hurtful publicity into a festive occasion.

If delay in making an adjustment is necessary, explain why. Hesitation in acknowledging receipt of a complaint is a capital mistake. It gives the complainant time to brood over his grievance, and hatches out a magnified sense of injury.

The acknowledgement should not show impatience or haste, however unjust the complaint may appear. Even unreasonable complaints should be handled with composure.

There are, of course, some fault-finding people who do precious little thinking about what they say. They release their own tension and unhappiness by criticizing others. But for all except those who are totally unreasonable most business firms go to great lengths to eliminate the cause and repair the damage revealed by complaints.

Handling complaints

A company doing business with the public or with other firms needs a policy with regard to complaints that makes clear its desire to serve customers. The alternative is to lose business.

No complex system need be worked up. Keep the procedure simple. But supervisors should explain unmistakably to new employees, and repeat at intervals, that the company desires above all good treatment of customers. Then they should lay down a few ground rules which make clear the area in which each worker is responsible.

To make no provision for training employees in dealing with complaints is a short-sighted, if not blind, policy. When a complaint is made to a junior worker who has been properly instructed he may often do whatever is necessary to adjust it, and he should be required to do so. If the matter is beyond his jurisdiction, or is too weighty for him to handle, he should take it immediately to his superior.

A “brush-off” at the junior level means that the complainant will write formally to someone in the

high ranks of management. Then the complaint becomes not only the original grievance but an accusation of inefficiency against the junior and a criticism of his supervisor.

Management should make clear that it desires every complaint to be welcomed as a constructive service. Workers should show sympathy with the person making the complaint, realizing that he would not have gone to the bother if he had not felt that he had been badly treated. Show willingness at once to investigate thoroughly and to correct whatever is found to be wrong. Get at the facts, learn exactly what happened and the extent of the damage. Do not argue. Do not hint that the customer may be dishonest or careless. When the customer is right, or partly right, make the correction or adjustment promptly in the best spirit. When the customer is wrong, explain the grounds for your decision in simple terms. By so doing you show regret while at the same time enlisting the customer's sense of justice.

This does not mean, obviously, that workers are to be wishy-washy people, subscribing to the slogan that "the customer is always right." It does mean that they do their best to adjust the matter complained about, to straighten out the customer's thinking in a nice way, and to send him away with a pleasant feeling about their efficiency and their firm's good character.

Analyse complaints

The generality of complaints must be broken down into particulars so as to be manageable. Perspective is important, so that you see things in their relationships.

Be alert to pick the significant criticism out of all that is said. Try to uncover the hidden content of the complaint, if it is a serious one. It may be a disguise for something else, for buried dissatisfactions or for enticing offers from a competitive concern. Whether it is valid or invalid, relevant or irrelevant, a grievance that is brought out into the open is less dangerous than one that is not expressed.

Then look at yourself and your firm. Have you had any part in creating the reason for this cause of distress? Has it grown in size and intensity because of your neglect? Can it be corrected without any additional irritations? Next, look at the complaint itself. What are the causes? Can you find a sound remedy that is fair to both your firm and your customer?

Talk over the complaint so that both you and the complainant know exactly what is at stake.

The vital thing is to listen. Show respect for the other fellow's point of view, even if you do not agree with it. Quite often all that people want is to have their opinions respected. This does not mean that you should concede that the customer is right, but only that you should make him feel that you can understand how he came to take his position. Your listening assures him of your entire fairness, and predisposes him to take a like attitude.

Then, when the facts are on the table, study the evidence. Does it support the complaint? In *Sales Trails*, the house organ of Bulman Bros., lithographers, Winnipeg, the story is told of the defendant in a hard-fought civil case who, after pleading "Not guilty" changed his plea to "Guilty" toward the end of the trial. He told the surprised judge: "I thought I was innocent, but at that time I hadn't heard all the evidence against me."

Avoid being drawn into an argument. An argument is a contest which someone must lose, and if you win you have forfeited goodwill and probably antagonized a customer.

Handling a complaint does not call upon you to lash yourself into a state of tension. If your case is good you do not need passion to add force to it. We all suffer the urge to "cut down to size" the critic across the counter, but making him lose face accomplishes nothing worth while and it leaves us with a nasty taste in our mouths. The price is too high for a momentary triumph.

Adopt a constructive attitude. Show that you respect the complainant's position and are giving attention to his statements. That makes it easier for him to come down off his perch and agree with you.

By avoiding these things: argument, display of cleverness, talking down to the critic, evidence of impatience, you will find that many a request impossible to grant can be discussed to the point where the conclusion is mutually satisfactory.

Compromise and courtesy

In handling complaints, astute workers make it a practice to concede as much as possible, sacrificing details in order to keep the matter always in the area of possible reconciliation of the complainant's demands and the company's settlement.

What does conceding a point mean? It is very like priming the farm pump. You give the dry pump a bucket of water so that you may then draw as many buckets as you want.

If the remedy suggested to you is not acceptable, try to suggest an alternative that will be fair without imposing on your company. But leave the customer with his dignity. It is possible, and nothing less should be our endeavour, to refuse an unjust request with such consideration that we erase the unpleasantness and resell our company as a desirable place to do business.

Through it all we must be courteous. Another person's rudeness must not be allowed to set the standard for our response. Tact and courtesy lubricate any complaint situation. They may not settle the affair, but they do help toward settlement.

There is an important personal bonus in being polite. Even if you don't feel civil or cheerful in difficult circumstances, the mere fact that you assume the appearance preserves your dignity.

When presenting your reasoning about a complaint,

be unflinchingly urbane and moderate. Modest presentation of your case is more effective than is the making of loud noises. When Jupiter started to thunder in the midst of an argument his opponent said: "Now I know that you are wrong".

These considerations of manner and demeanour are important to the success of anyone who seeks advancement in any business or profession.

Tact, "the art of all arts", is made up of adroitness in appreciating circumstances and acting accordingly; of consideration for others; of skill in saying or doing what is most appropriate.

When your consideration and courtesy have brought about a settlement: what now? If the complaint has been one of significance, the worker or his supervisor should follow through after a period to learn if the bad spot has been improved, and to underline their continuing interest in the customer. The purpose of the settlement was not only to silence the complainant, but to display genuine interest in the customer. A recheck is clear evidence of your firm's sincerity.

Writing letters

The handling of complaints by correspondence requires application of the same principles as have been outlined for handling complaints at the counter.

Under no circumstances does the writer of a letter permit any evidence of resentment to creep into his reply. Like all business correspondence, answers to complaints should be courteous, cheerful, tactful, clear, complete, and brief — but not brief to the point of disparaging your correspondent. In writing about a complaint you are obligated to give a full, understandable and civil explanation.

There is no fixed style for letters answering complaints, any more than there is a style for complaint letters, than which there are no more diverse types. Organize your ideas, because clear thinking must precede clear writing. Think of the sort of person to whom you are writing, and aim your reply at him, not at his complaint.

Some people are afraid to be friendly in their letters. They behave like computers writing to computers. They shy away from amiability because they fear that they will be thought of as "phonies" who have assumed a disguise for the occasion, or they are afraid that they may commit themselves or their firms.

Being friendly should not raise these scarecrows. It would be a grave mistake to indulge in flowery language foreign to our natural talk when we are answering a complaint letter; but it is no mistake at all to incorporate in our letters the warm, kindly, personal language that comes naturally to us in person-to-person social contacts. Nor need friendliness involve committing us to something undesirable. We can be amiable without going beyond the logic of our purpose in writing.

When you have to say "No", do so in an obliging manner. Begin your letter with some point of agree-

ment. It may be appreciation for submitting the complaint so clearly. Present tactfully your firm's side of the case, thus giving your reader a chance to prepare himself for the rejection. Tell why what is requested cannot be done. Be specific and informative. State the rejection clearly.

Even a "No" letter is a sales letter. It is selling the idea of your firm's willingness to serve, and the belief in your goodwill, as a foundation upon which satisfactory business may be built.

On the other hand . . .

If the shoe is on the other foot, and you are in the position of making a complaint about something, here are some points to bear in mind.

Most firms know that it is to their advantage to rectify errors in order to retain your business and to keep you as a booster. Your letter need be nothing more than a clear, complete and courteous statement of what has happened.

Assume that the company at fault did not intentionally make the mistake. If you, as complainant, charge dishonesty or poor management or bad business policy, you are almost sure to arouse a feeling of opposition. You will be more likely to obtain a satisfactory settlement by emphasizing a firm's good nature, than by crushing it under a mountain of indignation.

It is sometimes advantageous to state your case and leave it to the firm to suggest a solution or settlement. At the best you may receive something more generous than you would have claimed; at the worst you are back where you started, with a new opportunity to present your claim.

Discretion and skill

The discreet and kindly and skilful handling of a customer who complains is a constructive action in your company's interest, and your own. Here is a test of your human relations knack as well as of your job ability.

The principal points to practise are: acknowledge a complaint at once, indicating your interest in it; make a speedy investigation; give your decision without delay.

It can be truly said that life is never humdrum for those who are expressing their abilities in the very difficult job of handling complaints. There are letter writers who welcome the arrival on their desks of a particularly troublesome or even malicious complaint, because it gives them a chance to exercise their talents in solving a perplexing problem.

When a person comes to grips with a challenging situation, either person-to-person or by correspondence, and handles it properly, that is fulfilment of his creative urge. He is not patching up something, but is building something.