



## What's your problem-solving approach?

Do you go into high-stress mode when a customer comes to you with a problem? If you use a practiced approach to problem-solving, you shouldn't have to. Here are some tips:

**Be honest.** You will never have to stress over what you told the customer if you tell the truth.

**Get the facts, and document them.** If it is a complicated issue that may take several phone calls to resolve, create a file and update it after each contact.

**Be yourself.** Listen carefully, and get to know a little bit about the customer if the opportunity arises.

**Don't take things personally.** You're probably not to blame for most of the issues that you have to deal with, so don't let them affect you personally.

**See things through to the end — and beyond.** Make those follow-up calls, especially if you have promised to do so. When you close the loop with customers, not only do they have more respect for you, but you will feel good about yourself. **TCC**

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## Could your communication style be creating conflict?

One of the primary challenges that faces customer service reps is dealing with difficult customers. But the truth is, says Stacey Hanke, a communications consultant and co-author of *Yes You Can: Everything You Need from A to Z to Influence Others to Take Action*, in many cases reps create that state of conflict themselves via their communication style.

"We often create conflict situations without even realizing it. We interrupt. We show that we are not really listening. We fail to acknowledge that the customer's concern has value," Hanke says. "And when those things happen, we bring a lot of conflict upon ourselves."

What can reps do to improve their communications and avoid potential conflicts? There are a number of things, Hanke says, but number one is to remember to put yourself in the customer's shoes. "Think about when you are a customer," she says. "Avoid doing the things that you don't like when you are on the receiving end, and replicate what you like — make it your own."

Following are more of Hanke's communications tips for customer service reps.

### Watch your language and tone of voice

"Your tone of voice is especially important in communicating to customers that they are important. And this is especially true when you are dealing with customers over the phone," says Hanke. When you are face-to-face with customers, you can show them that they are important simply by looking at them and making eye contact. On the phone, you can accomplish the same thing by adding pauses as you speak to encourage the customer to talk.

"By pausing and letting them speak, customers will feel that they are being heard and that their message or concern is important," Hanke says. "And a lot of times, just feeling like you are being heard will reduce objections and hostility."

Even when you are saying "no" to a customer, you can do it in a way that minimizes conflict. For instance, instead of saying, "No, that's not our policy," you can say, "Here are some things that we can do for you ..." and then provide the customer with some options. The answer may be "no,"

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but providing options and offering them in a sympathetic tone of voice can help to avoid potential conflict.

Hanke also warns that customer service reps should try to avoid the words “but” and “however.” A rep might say, for example, “I have the return information, but I need you to fill out this form.” The “but” is like a slap in the face, Hanke says, and customers tune out what was said before the “but.” Hanke recommends that you eliminate the “but” — or “however” — and add an “and.”

### **Build rapport by asking open-ended questions**

Establishing rapport with a customer is especially important in avoiding conflicts. And Hanke believes that reps can begin to establish a positive rapport right from the start by asking more open-ended questions.

“The majority of our conversations — even those with family and friends — tend to be relatively closed-ended. Did you do this? Has that been completed? Etc.” Hanke says. “By opening up the conversation through the use of open-ended questions — i.e., ‘Tell me about that.’ ‘Give me some more details.’ ‘What happened next?’ — and by listening carefully to what the customer has to say,” says Hanke, “you tap into the instant rapport that comes from demonstrating that you care.”

The problem with closed-ended questions is that the back and forth question and answer quickly begins to sound and feel like an interrogation, and that can make the customer angry too. “You are putting the customer under a spotlight, and the heat of it gets them upset,” Hanke says. “You will gain so much more information, save their time, and

### **Stay positive, but lose the “uptalk”**

Articulation and projection are also very important in communicating with customers over the phone. The end of your sentences, in particular, can have an affect on how confident you seem.

“A lot of times we are in a hurry on the phone, and so we start talking in long sentences, and sentences that run together. The result for a lot of reps is that their voices begin to trail off at the end of a sentence. That makes it difficult for customers to hear what we are saying, and they are likely to stop listening,” says Stacey Hanke. That’s another way in which conflict can arise — with the customer thinking the rep didn’t tell him something and the rep thinking, ‘Yes, I did.’”

Another vocal habit, and it’s one that is generally more common with women than with men, says Hanke, “is when we are not sitting up straight and we fall into a pattern of ‘uptalk’ — where at the end of a sentence your voice goes up and it sounds like you are asking a question?”

It begins to sound like the rep is questioning his or her own statements, which is likely to diminish their credibility and lead to the customer’s losing confidence in what they are saying.

save your time, if you start instead with an open-ended question.”

### **Use body language to stay focused**


When customers feel that you are not paying attention, or that you are not in command of the situation, tempers are more likely to flare. The first step to improving these communication issues is body language. And yes, body language is important even over the phone. It is much easier to convey confidence and authority over the phone if you are sitting up straight or even standing than it is if you are slumped or slouched.

“That’s largely because of your breath,” Hanke says. “What happens when we sit at our desks all day is that we start to lean and slouch. And when we slouch we tend to constrict our diaphragms. That impacts the tone of voice as well as the volume. So just sitting up straight or standing up is going to convey more confidence.”

Another body-language issue

is fidgeting when you are talking to customers — “especially if it is something that is making noise — like fidgeting with a pen,” says Hanke. “Fidgeting will throw your focus off, away from the customer and the customer’s issues.”

In general when you are on the phone, if you are day-dreaming, looking around, watching the people that are walking by, or staring out the window, she says, “there is no way you are going to be focused, and this is going to come across to customers.”

In face-to-face communication, reps can maintain focus by making eye contact. While you are on the phone you can maintain focus in much the same way. “You can stay focused by keeping your eyes trained on something in front of you until you finish one sentence or thought. Look at your water bottle for one thought, then at the wall behind your desk, then at a photo. Simply by focusing your eyes on an object, you will be more focused in your thoughts and more attentive to the customer.” 

## Brand your service with "simple acts of customer care"


Customer service representatives — and organizations — fail, more often than not, when they forget the simple things, the personal touches that tell customers that they care, says Andrea Nierenberg, a trainer and consultant. Make sure that you aren't forgetting the little things by keeping these tips in mind:

- **Understand that little mistakes can have big consequences.** One mistake can undermine years of good service, so remember to be consistently reliable on every call and with every customer.

- **Be sensitive to the customer's time frame.** When a customer needs an immediate answer, do everything you can to provide it. And if you can't provide it immediately, get back to the customer as soon as possible either with an answer or a status update.

- **Look for opportunities to enhance customer relationships.** Do your homework, know your company's products and services, and know how your customers are using those products and services.

- **Understand that general assumptions aren't always true.** Learn what your individual customers' wants and needs are because every customer is different and can have a different set of expectations.

- **Stay in touch with customers.** As you get to know repeat customers, find out what their preferred mode of communication is and use that to stay in touch with information, updates, reminders, and of course, thank-you's. 



Debbie Brown  
Customer Service  
Representative  
Tacamor Inc.

### Frontline Spotlight

## This CSR brings compassion and sincerity to the job

Debbie Brown is a customer service representative for a third-party call center Tacamor Inc. in Placentia, Newfoundland. While Tacamor provides call center services for a number of business clients, Brown is assigned to one — a mortgage protection provider — that allows her to give full range to her skills and experience.

"Customers can call for anything from doing an application for their insurance, to detailing coverage, to updating banking information, to making a claim," Brown says. But whatever the reason and whomever the caller, she tries to treat every caller as she herself would like to be treated or as she would treat a member of her family.

"It's almost as if Debbie has one call for the whole day," says Christine L. Clarke, general manager for Tacamor. "That one person is the most important until that call has ended. And every person who calls in and reaches Debbie feels that way — that they are the most important person of the day. She really takes the time to make sure that the customer gets the full knowledge and understanding they need, and they are treated with the highest level of respect."

Occasionally a customer will call with a life claim or a disability claim. "And when it comes to a life claim," says Brown, whose own husband died a year-and-a-half ago, "I know how hard that phone call is for them to make, and I try to let them know they are going to get the support and the customer care that they require."

Clarke says that "Debbie defi-

nately brings a lot of compassion to the job — and that is reflected in her work. I listen in on a lot of calls, and I hear extreme sincerity in every one of Debbie's calls. Her tone doesn't change. Her understanding and compassion repeat themselves from one call to the next."

Brown is also one of Tacamor's top performers in terms of first call resolution and other metrics. "If someone calls and they have issues, they don't want to call several times before someone finally gets to the bottom of it," she says. "And they don't want to have to explain their story to a different agent every time they call."

New hires are also likely to feel the touch of Brown's empathy and concern as well. "We don't have a lot of new hires," Clarke says, "but when we do, Debbie is right there to guide and support them — especially in that period right after their training, when they are fresh on the phones."

Brown has taken on the role of on-the-floor coach and trainer in that respect. "I know from personal experience that it takes a while to build up your confidence, and the training environment is very different from when you are out there dealing with clients on every call," she says. "I tell them, 'If you need help, don't be afraid to ask. And if you have a question or aren't clear about what you've been told, don't be afraid to ask for a bit of clarification. It's important to understand what you need to know to make yourself a better and more confident customer service rep. And the more confident you become, the less help you will need.'"



## Show empathy

Customers are appreciative when you show that you understand their feelings and their point of view — even if you don't agree with them — say Karen Leland and Keith Bailey, authors of *Customer Service in an Instant*. To convey empathy, use phrases like the following:

- “I understand your point of view.”
- “I can see why you would feel that way.”
- “I hear what you are saying.”
- “I'm sorry that happened.”

## Practice email etiquette

As email communications with customers grow more common, one essential email courtesy that should grow along with it, says business etiquette expert Ann Marie Sabath, is the use of an automatic response when you are out of the office or away from your desk for significant periods of time.

Depending on your company metrics for responding to customer emails, you should update your message whenever you are going to be unavailable for a period of a few hours, and certainly if you are going to be gone for the day. Try something like, “Thank you for your message. I will be in a training session for the afternoon. However, I will be checking my

messages first thing tomorrow morning.”

Customers who are trying to contact you will appreciate knowing when they will hear from you, Sabath says.

## Never leave a customer with a problem

The secret to first call resolution is always to try to resolve a customer problem or issue yourself, without handing the customer off to someone else. Remember, the customer called you — that makes their problem your problem.

If you can't help them, make sure you get enough information from the customer to be able to pass him or her along to someone who can. In addition, if you do have to transfer a customer, make sure that person takes ownership of the call before you hang up.

## Follow up when appropriate

Not every customer situation requires follow-up, but there are situations when it is appropriate — particularly in the case of a customer who is upset with your company's product or service, says Renée Evenson, author of *Award-Winning Customer Service*. Here are her suggestions on when follow-up might make sense.

- Follow up if your customer had a lot of questions before buying the product.
- Follow up if the customer seemed confused about the agreed-upon solution to a problem.
- Follow up to thank a customer for a large sale.

• Follow up to tell existing customers about new products or upcoming promotions.

• Follow up after resolving a problem to be sure the customer is satisfied with the solution.

## Listen for the hidden anger

Some customers are too polite and too restrained to say they are angry with you or your company. But that doesn't mean that they are not angry and that you shouldn't take steps to deal with that anger. Signs of hidden anger in a customer's voice include talking faster, talking in a higher pitch, using shorter sentences, taking longer pauses, and inserting tell-tale sighs or breaths.

When you detect signs of anger, go into problem-solving mode: ask the customer to explain the problem, let the customer vent, look into potential options, and agree upon a solution. **ICC**

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“From listening comes wisdom and from speaking, repentance.”  
— Proverb