

# HOW TO DEAL WITH RUDE CUSTOMERS



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# INTRODUCTION

Part of my year I work in the travel industry as a Cruise Director/Program Director on cruise ships and work with tourists on a daily basis. Although I mainly deal with Americans, I have found that one cannot point fingers at any one nation, nor can one say certain groups of people are better than others. In general, in today's world, I have found that people as a rule are not as considerate towards their fellow human beings as before, and most people tend to only think of themselves. Add the new dawn of 'political correctness' and 'entitlement' into the mix, and dealing with opinionated, nasty people is becoming a daily occurrence for everyone in every industry.

Sadly, it's not just individuals who behave like this anymore either, but large corporations too. Pointing fingers is not what this article is about, but rather to explore solutions in dealing with a nasty people in your business, regardless of who caused the anger.

In short, I have found 3 recurring issues that add to creating frustration and tension amongst customers...

1 – Some multinationals have deceptive marketing campaigns that appear to promise one thing, yet the small print says something else – no wonder clients get annoyed.

2 – Customers see the world through their own eyes and hence have their own subjective and unrealistic expectations that are difficult to meet.

3 – Customers don't understand or read up on the product or service they are buying.

It's one approach to explore the motivation behind the rudeness, yet it's a complete different situation standing and facing such horrible individuals. Sadly, the poor 'customer service agent' is in the direct line of gun fire and usually cannot be blamed for the situation, yet takes the brunt of the anger.

Hence let us investigate some possible coping mechanisms and solutions so that both you and the irate customer are happy.

## NEVER GET EMOTIONALLY INVOLVED

### **Stay calm!**

The first step in remaining in control, is to stay calm. As a child I remember my parents always told me to count to ten before I react to anything. Boy is there truth in this saying! Whether the person is right or wrong, this delay in reacting gives you time to calm down and assess the situation. Visualize a beach with a sunset while the customer is shouting – it helps! Fighting fire with fire and responding aggressively simply does not work!

### **Listen!**

We have two eyes and ears so that we look and listen twice as much as we say – at least that's how another old saying goes. Remember, the customer has pent up energy he/she needs to get rid off. If you don't allow them to vent, the aggression remains. Usually, if you allow them to release all this anger, they calm down pretty quickly and become more approachable. Even if they are in the wrong, or completely absurd, let them finish their rant. Interrupting them will only make it worse. By listening, it also gives you a chance to assess their state of mind and whether they have a case or not.

Anger can be caused by someone else's mistake, misinformation and even misunderstandings due to cultural differences. If you immediately go on the defense, you throw fuel on the fire. Rather than focus on the issue, ask questions around it and try ascertain what went wrong. Thus you diffuse the anger and show the customer that you are not resistant to his/her complaint.

Very important, always respond in a slower and lower tone of voice. You want your voice to sooth and calm the customer. Often people have not read the fine print, or in fact any print and have their own preconceived, unrealistic expectations that is ultimately the root cause of the anger. When something is unclear I never question the customers' logic or character – this will only make things worse! However I do ask what it is that they expected – but never in a flippant way, but rather in a clam, collected and caring question, "Sir/Maam, what is it that you expected?" When they answer this question, it usually gives you the answer you seek, i.e. someone messed up, the client is ignorant, unrealistic, or selfish.

Now either assist them in solving their problem, or if they do have unrealistic expectations, you can calmly take out the advert, service agreement, brochure and show them that they are in the wrong. Be honest, have you bought items and services on the Internet and simply clicked the 'I agree' box for the terms and conditions without reading them? We all do it! Hence you not only need to know your product inside out, but also everything about the Consumer Protection Act. Let me share an example. Tourists buy a holiday in Europe, but are elderly and unstable on their feet. The marketing brochure clearly explains that every tour consists of at least 2 hours walking and that cobblestones are present in all the towns. If they guest shouts and complains that he/she was misinformed, then you are in your full right to calmly ask them for their brochure and show them in a polite manner exactly what the description says. Case closed! However, if that was omitted from the marketing and pre holiday information packet – then you need to find an alternative solution.

## **Don't take it personally!**

This is without a doubt the most difficult emotion to control, at least it was for me. The more you encounter rude people, the easier it becomes to deal with them. As they vent their emotions and scream and shout, just keep thinking to yourself, "This is not about me, I haven't done anything wrong." Keep repeating this to yourself.

I definitely don't believe that the customer is always right – there are definitely rude, nasty and manipulative people out there. Hence it is vitally important to learn to clearly differentiate between someone ranting and raving about the company, product or service, and someone becoming personally defamatory to you as an individual. If they are indeed shouting about being misinformed, wrong expectations or actual bad service – let them get it off their chest.

Recently a friend in the nursing profession gave me one of the best ways to handle a person like this. I now use this as my 'go to' method. I let the customer finish and then I reply, "Sir/Maam, why don't we reverse rolls. Imagine I am you and you are me right now – what would you do in my situation?" This is incredibly powerful as now this rude person has to look at him/herself through your eyes! Works like a charm most of the time.

For those remaining extreme cases where someone does become 'personal' and insults you as an individual, you are in your full right to stop that person immediately and clearly inform them that they have crossed the line and owe you an immediate apology, otherwise you will no longer attend to them. It does help if you have witnesses, but this is not always the case.

You are in your full right to stop the individual, but always in a calm, slow and quite voice, and explain that their grievance has nothing to do with you and that they have now crossed the line. At this point I inform them that they have two choices. 1.)

Apologize for personally defaming you and then explain that you are more than prepared to work through the issue together. 2.) Refuse to assist them until they apologize and immediately report the situation to a supervisor.

## UNDERSTANDING THE ROOT CAUSE OF THE PROBLEM

### **Identify with the customer**

Yes it is difficult to empathize with someone that is aggressive, but as you take a step back and listen to the individual, let them know that you understand their anger and frustrations and are there to assist. Also, by remaining calm it is easier to ignore any unreasonable rantings and only focus on what is relevant, thereby helping you identify and find a solution much faster.

Once they have explained their side of the story and you have listened to everything they have said, ask them if you may repeat what they told you, so that you are sure they know that you fully understand their frustration. This builds trust as the customer now sees you are listening. In many instances, this is all they really want, that someone listens.

### **Apologize, regardless of who is right or wrong**

You can apologize without admitting any fault on your or the company's side by merely saying, "I do apologize for the inconvenience of what has occurred, let us see together how we can take care of this." It is imperative to state that you want to take care of this together with the customer – now you're putting responsibility on their shoulders as well. Take note of the wording... you haven't admitted fault, but merely apologized for the inconvenience.



## **If there is nothing you can do, admit it, and say so immediately.**

Some people will try and push your buttons to get any form of compensation. As the person is upset already, it is pointless to lie to them if nothing can be done. You are better off telling the truth and clearly clarifying that there is nothing you can do. In the long run this saves time and further altercations with the customer.

### **Why?**

An irate customer will most likely continue to act out for as long as he thinks his behavior will change the outcome. If there's nothing that you or your coworkers can do, let the customer know. Be polite but firm - say something like, "I understand your frustration, and I'm terribly sorry, but there is nothing we can do about the problem." He/she may get more upset, but well eventually have to admit defeat and leave after he/she has had their final rant, if they see that you will not budge on the matter and cannot do anything further. Standing your ground is most important here otherwise the customers don't tend to back down.

### **Don't Lie**

No matter how tempting and no matter how good the chances are that you can get away with it, NEVER ever lie. Somewhere down the line it will bite you in the back. If you are not sure of something and don't know how to solve the issue, or just at a loss as what to do next - admit it.

Then immediately commit to the person that you will find out and research the matter and report back within a specific period of time. It is vital that you then stick to the commitment within the time period you promised. Remember, most of the time the person just wants to be acknowledged and heard. You admitting that you don't have an answer is not showing weakness! In fact it shows strength of character and this is further enhanced by you committing to finding an answer within a specific timeframe. Think about it... how many people take responsibility for their own actions today? Hardly any! Hence if you take the responsibility to

find out what happened and possibly identify a solution (good or bad) you are already doing more than most people would. This again shows integrity and interest in the customer.

## FINDING A SOLUTION

### **Go for the simplest logical solution**

If there is an easy way to resolve the issue and you have the authority to do so, do so immediately and turn a negative situation into a customer for life.

### **If it's in writing, get it**

Knowing your product/service and what the standard terms of service are within your company are vital in assessing whether a client is in the right or wrong. If the client accepted the company terms and conditions and you can prove this – then they need to accept this. If you tend to appease a rude client, even when they are in the wrong, this will bite you in the back – don't do it. If you have clear terms and conditions, simply clarify these with the customer in a calm and professional manner.

### **Send the customer to your superior**

If you are not authorized to solve the problem, or head office made a mistake, then definitely refer them to someone above the line and make sure you inform this person of the pending complaint and that they will be dealing with a difficult, rude customer. Follow up afterwards to see if it has been corrected. It is important to have all the facts at hand, and witnesses (if possible) should the customer accuse you of not any wrongdoing.

# FINAL COPING MECHANISMS FOR YOU

If you are an emotional person like me, nasty people can really hurt you and break you down, so it is vital to have coping mechanisms to get over this emotional distress as soon as possible.

## **Breathe and calm down**

Once it is all over you need to take a break and clear your head. Whether you simply wash your face with cold water, or go for a short walk – you need to give yourself time to unwind and cool down!

## **Let go**

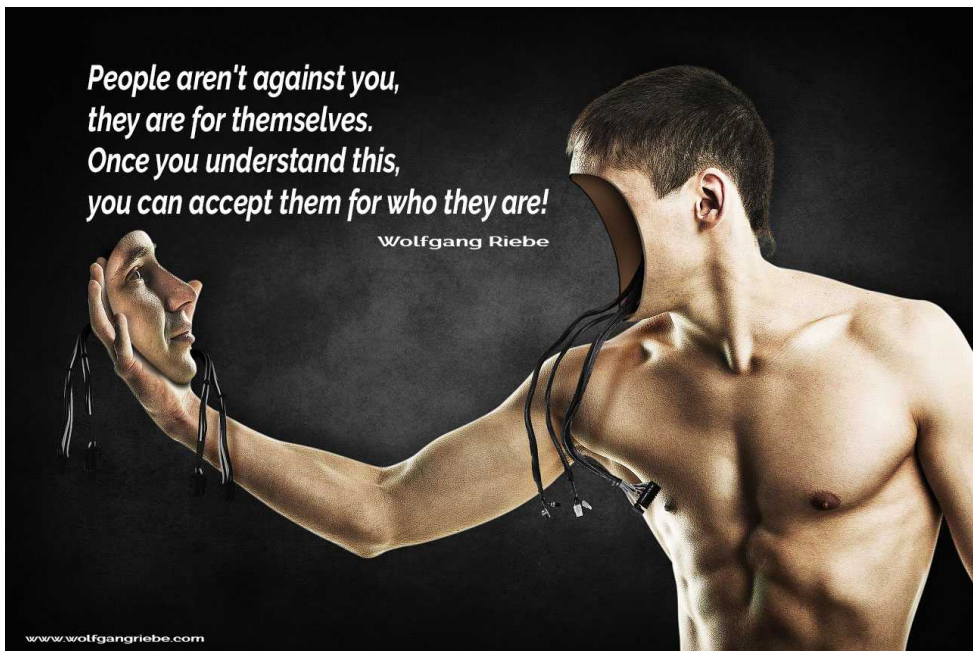
No matter how rude, or annoying the customer is, never vent or complain to coworkers, family and friends. Although this may seem like a reasonable solution to you, it will alienate those around you and damage your relationships with these people. That is definitely not worth it.

Rather, focus on thinking positive thoughts and feel good about yourself for having dealt with and survived the situation without stooping to the nasty person's level. There is a great saying I always remind myself of, "When arguing with a fool, make sure you are not that fool!" Makes you think, huh?

I come back yet again to knowing your product, rules and regulations. By all means go over the situation in your mind and clarify the 'facts'. This helps in realizing that you simply got caught in a crossfire of misunderstanding, a genuine complaint or simply just a rude person. Furthermore it helps you asses whether you

could have done anything differently and therefore be more prepared in the future should this happen again. It is only once you have gone through an experience like this, analyzed how you coped with it and taken the situation apart that you can improve and streamline the process for the future.

I continually think I have seen and experienced it all, but sadly fools have more experience and practice than me, so they always find a new way to create a scene – however, me remaining calm and objective and analyzing everything afterwards, ensures that I improve my coping techniques and ways to diffusing such situations.



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Wolfgang Riebe is a unique international keynote speaker on strategic magic who has inspired millions of people worldwide. He is a best-selling author with appearances in over 150 countries - from Hollywood to Singapore. Star of numerous television shows and many of his own prime time TV series, coupled with 27 years experience in the speaking, service and entertainment industry, make him a world leader in his field.



In 2012 the National Speakers Association (NSA) awarded Wolfgang the CSP (Certified Speaking Professional) designation, which is the highest award given to any professional speaker in the speaking world. This designation is currently only held by less than 800 professional speakers globally.

*"Greatness in a Speaker, is defined by passion, humility, sincerity and personal experience, coupled with his ability to capture, communicate and entertain his audience, while still sharing practical, sustainable and immediately implementable life skills which have a positive effect on all present."* Wolfgang Riebe

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