



## CONNECTING THROUGH CONFLICT: FIVE WAYS TO TURN ANGRY CLIENTS INTO HAPPY ONES

Maribeth Kuzmeski explains how to transform customer frustration into a stronger business relationship – one that lasts a long, long time.

It happens to the best of us. An upset client calls to complain about a product or service, and you're completely caught off guard. How do you react? Do you fly off the handle right along with him? Or do you respond in a calm, thoughtful way that salvages and even strengthens your relationship? A high-pressure scenario doesn't have to blow your client relationship sky-high – in fact, you can use it as an opportunity to truly connect with your client and keep him around for the long haul.

Conflict is a normal part of business, and we all need to learn how to deal with it in the right way. Some clients are just plain difficult. And yes, 'easy' clients can also become dissatisfied for a variety of reasons. The good news is that there are effective ways to handle conflict and resolve issues, and these methods will actually strengthen your relationship.

Remember that quite often, unhappy clients will not even tell you that they have a problem. They simply move their business elsewhere. So, if a client thinks enough of you to give you the chance to repair a bad situation, take it. Play an active role in making your customer happy so that you can be sure to keep him or her on board with you.

Creating clients for life is all about building relationships based on real human connections. As much as we all hope for smooth sailing in our interactions with clients, conflicts are bound to occur. If they never happened, anyone could be a great connector. It's what you do when there's a problem that separates the proverbial men from the boys. Here are a few tips that will help you keep your business relationships

from going bad, and rescue those that have started to sour.

**1. Extend a peace offering.** It's easy to reach out to clients when things are going well. However, it's all too easy to avoid them when hard feelings are present. Don't succumb to the temptation. Proactively reaching out to your clients can squash any negativity they may feel for you. Even the simplest of gestures can be effective: Offer an apology when you've made a mistake. Then, make things right by extending a peace offering. It doesn't



need to be anything extravagant. It can be as simple as a hand-written note, a refund, or a coupon.

I know the peace offering works on clients, because it has worked on me. At one point the relationship my firm had with a technology consulting group had turned sour. They had missed numerous project deadlines and just weren't satisfying expectations. I stuck with them, though, in hopes of repairing the relationship. Then one day, my contact Jeremy and I

discovered we had something in common – a love for hockey. I mentioned that my son's favorite team was the Pittsburgh Penguins, and that he and I would be watching them play for the Stanley Cup later that evening.

The Penguins ended up winning, and much to my surprise, Jeremy sent my son copies of magazines featuring their big win, a copy of the actual Pittsburgh newspaper from the day after, and a few other items. None of what he sent cost very much, but the impact of his gesture was significant. My son was beyond thrilled. And, it immediately changed the way I felt about the company.

**2. If an angry client calls you fuming mad, your initial reaction might be to argue back. But don't.** Instead, take a deep breath and remain calm. And most of all, diffuse your client's anger by immediately assuring her that you will make it right.

When faced with difficult situations with clients, offer solutions instead of giving a reactionary, defensive response. Your client may still want to fight, but you are dispelling their anger by staying calm and offering a helpful response. Just smile, take responsibility (even if you feel you haven't done anything wrong), and offer solutions. You can't control the way your client is going to act, but you can control your own actions. If you are reasonable, your client will eventually come around.

The solutions you offer may not be exactly what the client wants, but because you are trying to help instead of arguing, the results can't help but be better.



**3. Get them to listen to you by in turn, listening to them.** Customers will listen to what you have to say if you respectfully listen to what they have to say first. Knowing that you are truly listening to their concerns can cause your customers to agree to your suggestions much more quickly.

Try practicing Curious Listening. Hear the essence of what your customer is saying by repeating back what you heard. Ask questions so that your customer knows that you are actively seeking to understand why something is important to him. Make sure you aren't acting on unsubstantiated assumptions. Confirm with the client that you have correctly understood what he is saying. And listen for the "remarkable." In every conversation you have with a client, he will say something unique and remarkable. If you listen for his "remarkable," you will be able to come back to that later (even in a subsequent conversation) and connect with him on a different level. The "remarkable" may be something as simple as, "I'm thinking about taking an October vacation to Paris," or, "I'm a Packers fan," or, "We just landed our largest client!" The key is remembering it. It shows you are really paying attention to what happened, to how the other person feels, and to what resolution was reached.

**4. Have a standard service protocol at the ready.** Creating standards, procedures, and methods of dealing with clients and servicing their needs can really help when it comes to resolving conflicts or handling a dissatisfied customer. By creating a service protocol in advance, you provide a way to enforce how client conflict situations are handled. This allows you and your employees to more easily resolve issues and deal with those impossibly and consistently difficult clients.

By examining how difficult clients were handled in the past, taking into account both good and bad examples, you and your staff can begin to set boundaries regarding what is and isn't a proper way to react. Creating a protocol allows you to chart your path to resolution and figure out what you're going to say before a problem arises.

**5. Ask for feedback.** Don't be afraid to engage your clients. Ask them what you can do better, how you can improve. Supply them with feedback surveys so that they can anonymously share their thoughts, ensuring that they are as honest as possible. And when a problem has been solved, ask them if you handled it to their satisfaction and find out if there is anything they would like for you to have done differently. Ask-

ing for feedback is a great way for you to rectify any possible or growing problems before they become so great that they sour a client relationship.

At the end of the day, clients who feel a connection with you are loyal and will stay with you – sometimes forever. Dissatisfied clients not only go elsewhere, but they also tell others of their dissatisfaction. Dissatisfied clients will each tell an average of five other people about their displeasure with you. That means for every complaint, you could have up to 60 people who are walking around with a negative image of you and your company. You may incur a small cost in dealing with an angry customer, but not dealing with it can cost you much, much more. ■

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