

## How to handle complaints

There are several key stages when handling a complaint:

- **Thank the customer for complaining** - You should consider yourself lucky that the customer is prepared to give up their time and money to let you know they have a problem, instead of just walking away - a complaint is a gift.
- **Say that you are sorry** that the problem has happened - This is NOT an admission of guilt on your part, it's just good manners.
- **Put yourself in the place of the customer** - This will instantly give you an advantage, as you not only will have more empathy with the customer, but also you know your business better than them and so can hopefully see the solution quicker.
- Start with the view that **the customer has a valid point**, not that they are trying to rip you off - It is true that there are some professional complainers out there, but they are in the minority, and, if you are a local store, you probably know them anyway. Accepting that the customer may well have a point, even internally, may well trigger off ideas for an acceptable resolution.
- **Get all the facts first** - Letting the customer give you all of the information helps you fully understand the situation AND, if they are emotional, will give them time to calm down.
- **Correct the mistake** - Don't leap straight to the "free gift" route. While it's very tempting to give the customer a gift, or vouchers, too often it is done INSTEAD of solving the problem. This can lead to more complaints about the same thing in the future because the problem hasn't been fixed.
- Make sure that your definition of the right fix is the same as the customers.
- **Learn from every complaint** - Do something! Fix the process; train staff in the issue; eliminate the fault. Wherever possible let the complaining customer know that they have helped you resolve a problem - they'll feel great and come back again and again (and will probably tell their friends!).
- **Minimize reasons for complaints** - Do you have a continuous improvement culture? Do you check customer (and employee) satisfaction regularly? Do you check the quality of the goods sold in your organisation?
- **Always respond** - Make sure that EVERYONE who complains on the telephone, by letter, or by email gets a rapid and appropriate response.
- **Listen to your staff** - They nearly always care about your company and doing a good job. They are also much closer to the customers than you are. Ask their views regularly and make changes when they are sensible. Make sure THEIR complaints are handled too.

- **Lead by example** - It's not that your staff DON'T listen to what you say, it's that they DO listen, so make sure that you are always setting the right example, and giving complaints your personal priority. Reward good complaints handling.

Remember - it costs at least five times as much to gain a new customer than keep an existing one. Keeping a complaining customer should be the top priority, and at these cost ratios you can afford to be generous in your time and effort.

## Ten-point plan for dealing with complaints

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we get things wrong. How you deal with the situation when you don't meet a customer's expectations will determine whether you are able to retain that customer. [Mac Mackay](#) of [Duncan Alexander & Wilmshurst](#) shares his ten-point plan

1. **Apologize** - for the inconvenience
2. **Listen** carefully: get the facts and details.
3. **Sympathies**: show that you understand the problem. Show that you have heard their complaint.
4. Don't guess at an answer if you don't know it.
5. **Accept responsibility**: don't pass the buck. You are not saying that it is your fault. You are apologising and dealing with the complaint on behalf of the firm.
6. **Take action**: pass the complaint on to someone else or deal with it yourself.
7. Tell the client what you will do to **put things right**: if the process is taking longer than you thought, go back and apologize for the delay. Explain what is happening.
8. **Keep calm**, be polite and provide assurance (that you are willing to help; that the problem will not recur).
9. **Don't argue**: if the client is upsetting you and making you angry, and you can't avoid being dragged into an argument, involve someone else. Quite often, bringing in another person will defuse the situation.
10. Above all: **BE PROFESSIONAL**.

Written by [Mac Mackay](#) of [Duncan Alexander & Wilmshurst](#)