

The Angry Client: Your Practice's Best Friend

by Chuck Dennis

Do not fear the angry customer. He is not the enemy! Quite to the contrary, he is possibly one of the best friends your practice could ever have!

Every business, in every industry, has had to deal with angry customers. Even the best trained, most conscientious customer-centric businesses experience occasional lapses where they do not measure up to their customers' expectations. But if you get past the anger, tone of voice and occasional insult, you realize that your client is speaking to you because, although feeling wronged, he also feels that you can remedy the situation. This is a golden opportunity to *win* and to solidify your client's loyalty.

How so? Frankly, the primary differentiator between your actuarial service and those of your competitors may be the level of service you provide. It is unlikely that you have a secret plan or magic formula up your sleeve that none of your competitors know about. So it boils down to the service you provide, and how you provide it.

A study by Technical Assistance Research Programs (TARP) shows that customers who have had a problem resolved successfully and amicably tend to be more loyal than customers who have never experienced a problem with a particular business. Sound silly? Not really. It's easy to be customer-friendly when everything is going great, but showing grace under fire is where leaders separate with distinction from the wannabes. When a situation arises where things do not go the way a customer had envisioned, smart businesses use that opportunity to fix the error quickly and happily. You *learn* from the error to ensure that it does not occur again. And this is where the angry customer is your best friend.

The quietly dissatisfied client just leaves you for another consultant—you may not even know he or she is gone. But the angry client gives you a chance to make things right. Jump on that chance immediately! Here's how to do so, turning angry clients into loyal ones:

Step One: Be a Smart Listener

As all customer-focused businesses know, the world revolves around the customer, not their business. So, for consultants, when the angry client calls, it is

really the “boss” calling. And we all know it is never a good idea to interrupt the boss when he or she is angry! Therefore, it is imperative to let the customer get all of whatever’s steaming him off his chest.

Do not try to resolve his issue before he’s had the opportunity to explain not only the nature of his problem, but also the ramifications it has had on his life or business. The rush to fix a problem before acknowledging the pain is often where service calls go awry.

In today’s *fast Fast FAST* world of business, there is a tendency to want to swiftly finish with one client so you can get to the next. However, rarely do we hear a client say that the most important aspect of their call is to get off the phone as quickly as possible. Frankly, if a client is concerned enough about an issue to call or visit a consultant, then he wants that consultant to know the exact nature of that problem and why it is bothering him. And that may take some time.

While it is not a pleasant experience, this is exactly the kind of information that all businesses need to hear in order to hone their operations. Unfortunately, if your focus is on speed, then an opportunity to collect valuable knowledge on serving your practice’s audience is lost. Also lost is any hope of repeat business, because that client’s next call is going to be to your competitor.

Step Two: Be Empathetic

When you or your organization makes an error, or offends a client in some way, you need to make a sincere apology. But if you want to successfully recover from this mishap, you must know the best way to apologize. As stated above, the first thing to do is to hush up and listen—do *not* attempt to address the problem or the solution until the customer is done saying what he wants to say. Apologizing too soon reeks of insincerity. Making excuses for the problem is simply inappropriate. A thick skin is necessary. Other than asking questions to clarify the problem, your initial response should be one of empathy: “Oh that is not good! I understand why this would be upsetting to you.”

Step Three: Be Thankful

It is imperative that the next words out of your mouth are, “Thank you for telling me about this issue.” Thanking a customer for complaining not only disarms some of the anger, but it also sets the expectation for the resolution of the issue. And, after all, the client is giving you some free business counsel. So after thanking them, *then* you can sincerely say, “I apologize for the inconvenience you have experienced.”

Step Four: Be Resolute

Only after Step Three are you ready to discuss the explanation—and resolution—of the problem.

Resolution time is not the time for lame excuses. Never place the blame for your client's problem on another colleague/department/vendor, or, heaven forbid, on the client himself! Remember the goal here is to resolve the issue to the client's satisfaction, not to take the heat off of you.

Be specific. Tell your client what you are going to do, and when you are going to do it. Then ask if this meets with his/her approval.

Step Five: Be Forthcoming

Most importantly, do not *ever* use the dreaded phrase “our policy.” Why? Company policies are written with the company in mind, not its clients. Even if your policies are in place for good reasons, do not use this phrase. It is fraught with negativity and distrust. Instead, simply explain *why* the policy is in place. If there is a good reason, share it! If not, then re-examine it—it may be needlessly causing unrest!

To summarize, armed with new understanding from angry clients, smart businesses can prevent similar problems from recurring. Getting on the same side of the issues with your angry clients drives repeat business and referrals—major contributors to profitability.

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