



# Dealing With Difficult Customers

## Learning Outcomes

**By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:**

- ✓ Discuss how to deal with difficult customers
- ✓ Vocal techniques that enhance speech and communication ability.

# Dealing with Difficult Customers

## Dealing with Problems

You started out today just like any other: positive, prepared, and professional. But somehow, you didn't recognize a small problem and now you are looking at something really contentious.

Has that ever happened to you? What do you do now? Let's take a look at some suggestions and see if we can make sense of them.

### Test Your Knowledge

**Assess the situation.**

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**Meet the difficult behavior head-on.**

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**Stay calm and objective.**

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**Be upfront.**

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**Make it a two-way conversation.**

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**Put yourself in their place.**

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**Avoid getting defensive.**

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**Be flexible.**

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**Be tolerant.**

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## Dealing with Vulgarity

Although we can become practiced at managing difficult behavior and learn how to defuse tension very effectively, vulgar language deserves its own section. Swearing, harassment, and bullying have become so common in business, schools, and our lives that we almost expect it, despite the fact that it can make people extremely uncomfortable.

Sometimes, in the midst of a contentious issue, tempers flare and people swear and make demeaning personal comments. **The following statement will usually stop someone from using vulgar or inappropriate language:**

“(Insert name here), I realize that you are upset and I would like to help you. I am not in the habit of speaking in that fashion and I do not speak with people who use that kind of language. How about we move on from that and deal with the real problem here?”

This kind of approach will normally keep you calm and maintain your customer’s dignity, which means that you can move on.

In some cases, of course, the customer will not listen to you or change his or her behavior. In that instance, you have a couple of options.

**The first technique is to apply some heat yourself, skillfully.** Try this effective statement: “Excuse me Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, but could you please repeat that last sentence. I have to take notes and I got a little behind.” Usually, the customer will pause and then repeat the sentence without swearing; often, the situation will become much more civil.

**If the customer insists on swearing, ask if they would like to speak to your supervisor.** Generally, customers who are persistently difficult or who make threats of harm or lawsuit need to be passed on to a supervisor. This does two things for you. First, it creates a pause in the conversation so that by the time the person gets to talk to the supervisor they are less angry. Second, they may also feel that they are finally talking to the person they need to.

If an angry or vulgar customer gets a chance to think about what they want to say, at some point they may also realize that they will not get what they want. They also can be well prepared to fight long and hard for what they want. If you, as a customer service representative, give them an ear and satisfy their need to be heard, you are giving them what they least expect; this can actually avoid the conflict from escalating.

**Violence is a real issue.** You are not required to hear nor tolerate threats to your personal safety. If a caller makes a threat to you, document it (hopefully, you work somewhere that all calls are recorded for this very reason!), and report it immediately to your supervisor and to the police. Most jurisdictions have legislation to deal with threatening behavior, and although it is not always quick or efficient, all incidents must be reported and documented.

## Phone Tag and Getting the Call Back

### Phone Tag

While the new technology that is available today can make it harder for you to reach the decision maker, it can also offer you some opportunities too. Certainly, you can't afford to ignore it. One thing we should be doing is keeping track of who we have called and how often we have called them.

When we do take advantage of voice mail and leave a message, there are four strategies we can use that help us make our message more effective.

### Option One: The Referral

This is the best option when you have the opportunity to use it. However, it must be an honest referral. If you leave a message like the following example, you will usually get a response:

Example: “Hello Mr. Fields, I was talking to Joe Sampson and he suggested I give you a call because I offer \_\_\_\_\_ service and he mentioned that you are looking for this. When you get a chance, please call me at 901-555-2120.”

### **Option Two: The Third-Party Message**

This option is useful if you are working for company ABC and you have delivered excellent results for them. You know that company XYZ is in the same type of business, would know the name of company ABC, and could probably use the same type of services/products. You will want to sound poised, confident, and concise.

Example: “Hello Ms. Jones, I’m calling regarding Company ABC. When you get a chance, could you please call me at 901-555-2120?”

### **Option Three: The Warm Cold Caller**

The script sounds something like this: “Hello Ms.\_\_\_\_\_. This is Freda Whitehouse with ABC Company calling. My number is 901-555-2120, and I can be reached at this number between nine and noon, Monday to Friday. I was told you are the person to speak to about\_\_\_\_\_, and I’d really appreciate the chance to chat with you about it. My number is 901-555-2120.”

### **Option Four: The Straight-Ahead Pitch**

Use this when no other techniques are available to you. You’ve tried early morning calling, you’ve tried enlisting the help of the receptionist/secretary/assistant, and this is your final attempt of the month to reach this person. You simply adapt your standard cold calling script, which you have already prepared. It might sound something like this.

Example: “Hi Ms. Jones, this is Freda Whitehouse with ABC Company calling. I’m sorry I missed you today. We just put together an interesting (training package, computer program, Web site, etc.) for XYZ Company so they could spend less time dealing with employee conflict, tracking results, and providing general information to interested customers. I thought something like this might work well for your company too. If you are interested and want to learn more about how we can help, I’d like to get together to talk about it a bit. Would this Friday at two work for you?”

### **Tips**

Whatever response option you choose, prepare your script, and practice until you can deliver your message in a professional, confident, and friendly tone of voice, without hesitation.

Before making your first sales call of the day, prepare yourself and your environment for the task.

## **Following Up**

After working hard to cover your market, be sure to keep a record of your calls and results. Be sure to plan a callback at a future date to those prospects who indicate an interest, but who can’t meet with you now.

Avoid missed opportunities by doing the following immediately after each call:

- Record any notes and update the contact’s information on your database. You may be able to do this during the call if you use a headset.

- Record the date of your appointment and directions (if required).
- Be prepared to fulfill any commitments made to the contact during your call.

Surprisingly, many sales and service people do not consciously track tasks and calls that they need to follow up. As a result, they struggle to meet their goals every month. Successful sales and service people understand the power in working a warm prospect, and providing prompt and efficient follow up.

**Use the space below to sketch out a template for your ideal follow-up tracking sheet or form.**

## Stress Busting

A great way to handle stress is to manage your own life and time effectively. Have you ever noticed that we can become more out of touch (and stressed) when there are lots of things around us that are out of our control? Many call centers are set up to make maximum use of space, are brightly lit, and noisy. Having a small space, competition for prizes or sales incentives, loud environments, and whiteboards covered in statistics, in addition to the stress that can come from complaining (by colleagues or customers), can add stress to your day. How do you manage and keep on top of stress?

One technique is to manage the things that we can manage:

- Our behavior
- Our reactions
- Our schedules
- Eating nutritiously
- Exercise
- Our own learning

Things that we have less influence over should have less influence over us, such as:

- Corporate goals
- The economy
- Layoffs
- Untrained staff
- Equipment changes
- Size and scope of our workspace

- Shift in work priorities

## Test Your Knowledge

Write down your top three training ideas so that individuals new to a call center and customer service role can thrive.

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## News from Within

### Management Reports

Working in a call center can be challenging at the best of times! Here are some of the most common issues that call center employees face.

### Poor Training

Employees who must hit the ground running are hired and set up with very little training. Most have either some sales skills or some administration skills, but rarely both.

### Lack of Structure

For staff that are in an in-bound call center (for example, answering inquiries about services such as alarm systems or software material), there can be times of the day that are very slow. There are no set duties for these slow times, so employees may read, study, or play video games to pass the time.

### Inconsistency on How to Handle Difficult Calls/Customers

Training must be provided to every new employee and should be offered for senior staff to keep them up to date and effective.

### Distractions from Co-Workers

Depending on how the center is set up, as well as the dedication of individuals, they may pester, joke, or just generally waste time as a way to avoid getting bored or to have some fun at work.

### Presenteeism

These are people who are physically at work; they show up for each shift and provide some service. They are not, however, engaged in the job, so they put in their time without actually committing to the

organization. The word is a play on the word **absenteeism**, where an individual is absent from work. With presenteeism, they are there in the workplace, but contribute next to nothing and might just as well be absent.

## Close with Vocals

### Hyoid Limbering

The hyoid muscles connect the lower part of your jaw to the hyoid bone, which is at the top of your voice box, or larynx. These muscles help to control the movement of your vocal folds, and you use them all day for swallowing, chewing, and speaking. Like any muscles, they can become tense or fatigued, making your voice sound tight or higher pitched than you expect. But like any muscles, they also respond to stretching and conditioning. Do the following exercise for about one minute, three to five times a day.

- Close your mouth; keep your jaw relaxed.
- Lower your chin toward your chest.
- Use your fingertips to gently push the hyoid muscles upward. Do not rub them or massage them from side to side.
- Stretch the area from directly under your chin to the end of your jawbone close to your ear.

### Hum

Humming will help you strengthen and control your vocal folds. You'll need about five minutes of uninterrupted time to complete this exercise. Make sure that you follow the steps in order, and repeat them three times throughout the day.

- Inhale, taking in your usual amount of air.
- Exhale slowly, saying the word "hum" at your normal volume.
- Exhale evenly to maintain the volume and quality of the hum.
- Take note of any extra notes with your hum – such as a flutter sound – if you relax the tension or lose control as you exhale.
- Repeat the humming and be sure to keep the extra notes out of your voice.

### Sighing

This exercise will help you both relax and strengthen your voice. Follow the steps in the order given to reach maximum benefit. Allow yourself about five minutes of uninterrupted time, and repeat the steps three times throughout the day.

- Inhale, taking in your usual amount of air.
- Exhale slowly, sighing softly with the sound of the word "sigh" stretched out as "s-i-g-h."
- Keep the volume level the same as you exhale, and then make it softer and softer as you exhale.

## The Diaphragmatic Breath

This exercise is crucial for increasing control of your vocal strength and quality. This is a type of breathing that is mastered by singers, musicians, dancers, and actors, and it is equally useful for speaking on the telephone. Set aside five minutes for this exercise, three times a day.

- Stand in front of a mirror or a partner so that you can see or get feedback on what you are doing.
- Place your fingers lightly on your diaphragm, just beneath your rib cage above your waistband. Feel the movement as you breathe.
- Inhale slowly through your nose or mouth, directing the air to your diaphragm. You will feel the diaphragm move forward; your shoulders and upper chest should not move at all.
- Hold the inhaled air for three seconds.
- Exhale slowly, counting to twenty by saying “one one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand...” until you reach “twenty one thousand.”
- Stop when your exhale becomes a strain.
- If this is the first time you’ve tried this exercise, you probably won’t reach twenty in one breath. Repeat the exercise three times a day until you can reach twenty comfortably.