



# UNIT-9

## Complaint Handling

### Learning Outcomes

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

- ✓ Identify and deal with the various different types of complainers
- ✓ Handle aggressive and abusive complainers professionally

## Unit 9

### Complaint Handling

As a hotel receptionist, dealing with dissatisfied customers is all part and parcel of the job. Some of whom will be entirely pleasant and reasonable, while others will go out of their way to make your life difficult.

#### Complainer Types

Every human being is different, and we all handle disappointment in different ways. As a result, there are various different *types* of complainers you will encounter while working as a hotel receptionist. Each dissatisfied guest you encounter will be unique, but will in most cases fall within one of several primary classifications of complainer. Each of which having its own assigned danger level (from 1 to 10, 10 being the most dangerous – the type of guest who could cause damage to the property and its reputation, and 1 being the least dangerous – the guest who will happily accept anything offered to them):

#### Silent Complainer

Danger level – 5

These days, the silent complainer is the most common and prolific of all. They are the guests that give no direct indication that anything is wrong, only to then provide negative feedback by way of comment cards or customer reviews. It could also simply be that they never communicate their dissatisfaction by any means - they simply do not return to your hotel in the future. The biggest problem with silent complainers is that their silence gives you no opportunity to address the issue (or issues) that disappointed them. As a result, future guests may face the same issues and likewise leave your establishment disappointed.

Identifying a silent complainer is tricky, given that they may not give any obvious indication of their dissatisfaction. This is one of the reasons why it is important for every hotel worker to be as proactive as possible. Rather than waiting for guests to communicate their satisfaction or dissatisfaction, you must ask *every* guest on multiple occasions if everything is meeting their expectations. Particularly when guests check out, this is your opportunity to make sure everything was satisfactory during their stay, and to address any issues they may have otherwise left without telling you about.

#### Social Complainer

Danger level – 8

The social complainer is the type of person who likes to broadcast their dissatisfaction to anyone and everyone who will listen to them. Again, they tend to be unlikely to communicate their dissatisfaction with the hotel directly. Instead, they wait until they have checked out, before making their thoughts abundantly clear on social media.

It's become the norm for dissatisfied customers to head straight to sites like TripAdvisor to leave negative reviews. Some will also voice their complaints via Google Reviews, along with as many other platforms as they have access to. Social complainers can be particularly dangerous, given the fact that their complaints can (and probably will) be viewed by thousands of prospective customers. The more negative feedback is left about your hotel online, the more difficult it becomes to paint a positive picture about your business.

This is why businesses should take online reviews extremely seriously, responding to all feedback (negative or positive) the moment it is published. Do not give the impression that you simply ignore negative reviews and have no interest in the comments left by your guests.

### **Empathetic Complainers**

Danger level – 1

By far the easiest complainers to handle, these are the individuals who, despite having negative experiences, are not looking to give you a hard time. They understand and accept that things go wrong, they're not particularly angry about the issue and are perhaps simply wanting to bring it to your attention. They may not even be interested in any type of compensation - they just want to bring the matter to your attention for your own benefit, and for that of your future guests.

Of course, just because somebody isn't specifically looking for compensation doesn't mean you shouldn't offer them at least a *token* gesture. Basing your decisions regarding compensation purely on the personality of the complainer is not the way to go. If the complainer's issue justifies a discounted stay, a free future stay or anything else, make sure it is offered.

### **Assertive Complainers**

Danger Level – 7

An assertive complainer is defined as an individual who already has an idea in mind as to how they want the issue to be resolved. Rather than simply reporting an issue and 'seeing what happens next', they believe that the issue they have encountered entitles them to something specific. It could be anything from a free drink in the bar to a significant discount on their overall stay, but it will be something tangible they want and expect. As a result, they are usually unwilling to negotiate and can be very stubborn.

This type of complainer can be particularly dangerous, as it is possible for the issue/exchange to escalate and become heated if they do not get their own way. At the same time, allowing such individuals to get their own way when they are not necessarily entitled to compensation can breed bad habits. If they get away with it today, there's every chance they'll try the same approach in the future. Again, it's a case of fairly and objectively ascertaining what the complainer is entitled to, and ensuring it is offered.

## **Aggressive Complainer**

Danger level – 10

Aggressive complainers are ranked at the very top of the danger scale for obvious reasons. When situations become emotionally charged, it is difficult to predict what will happen next. As a hotel receptionist, the last thing you want is an irate guest shouting and screaming in front of other guests. Worse still, an angry guest who becomes verbally or perhaps even physically aggressive. The more aggressive the complainer, the bigger the danger for both the business and anyone else who may be present at the time.

Irrespective of the nature and severity of the complaint, you have every right to refuse to deal with individuals who become aggressive or threatening. It is your responsibility to remain cool, and calm and level-headed at all times - responding with aggression will only make things worse. Explain to the guest that while you understand the situation, you are not willing to tolerate aggressive behaviour or abusive language. If necessary, simply walk away from the conversation and bring the matter to the attention of senior staff members.

With aggressive complainers in particular, it can be useful to take them away from primary public areas and have the conversation elsewhere.

## **Professional Complainer**

Danger Level – 10

The professional complainer can also be exceptionally dangerous, though for an entirely different reason. These are the individuals who have made complaining and claiming compensation something of a lifestyle. They already know exactly what they need to say and how the need to say it, in order to get their money back or receive some kind of discount. They will study every aspect of your facility from top to bottom, in order to find at least *something* to complain about. If nothing out of the ordinary is found, they will happily make something up - something that entitles them to compensation of some kind.

Professional complainers can be extremely difficult to deal with, given that they will have invested time, effort and thought into their actions. They will probably already have an answer prepared for every question you ask - there's a good chance they'll also already know your hotel's general compensatory policies. This is why *all* hotels keep detailed records of both complaints and compensation issued. If an individual is identified as having made repeat complaints in one or more hotels within your brand, they may be a professional complainer. In which case, your hotel's management team may choose to refuse future bookings for the individual in question, simply stating that your hotel is clearly not a satisfactory residence for the person in question.

## Compensatory Complainer

Danger level - 6

These complainers are similar to professional complainers, though aren't necessarily as strategic or prepared. They know they can get something out of it by complaining, but aren't entirely sure how your policies work. They are technically 'in it to win it' and will argue their case to be offered something for free. However, they may not necessarily present enough evidence, or even have a valid case for compensation.

Interestingly, the compensatory complainer can also become a different type of complainer during the exchange. Some become assertive, some realise they don't have a valid case and become empathetic, others become aggressive, and then there are those who seem to be happy with the resolution, only to leave scathing reviews all over the web. The way you handle that complaint will have some bearing on the outcome, though there's nothing you can do about the personality or character of the complainer. In any case, compensatory complainers are usually willing to negotiate, which means you can always try offering them something relatively remedial to keep them happy.

These represent just a small selection of the various types of complainers you will encounter as a hotel receptionist. What's important to remember is that every time you receive a complaint, it is brought to your attention by a 100% unique human being. Most likely, a human being that doesn't see the situation the same way as you do. A tiny speck of dirt on a towel might be insignificant to you, but could easily cause a different individual to blow a fuse. Expectations differ significantly from one person to the next and it is almost impossible to please all of the people all of the time.

The good news being that just as long as you know how to handle the various types of complainers outlined above, you'll be prepared for pretty much anything your guests throw your way.

### The Three Cs

As every guest and every complaint is inherently different, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, it's a case of expecting a dynamic exchange and responding to the situation as it plays out. Nevertheless, every complaint you encounter will be easier to handle if you remain mindful of the "Three Cs" strategy:

- **Confident**
- **Calm**
- **Collected**

## **Confident**

The key in this instance lies in knowing where to draw the line between confidence and aggression/condescension. Confidence means taking the situation seriously and handling the issue in a professional manner. It's also about making it clear that you believe in what you are saying and that you know how to handle the issue.

If it's clear you're out of your depth and panicking, the complainer immediately gains the upper hand. Even if they don't attempt to take advantage if you, they'll get the impression they're speaking with someone who cannot handle their complaint. At the opposite end of the scale, coming across as *too* confident can give the impression you're not taking the customer seriously.

## **Calm**

Irrespective of how emotionally charged the situation gets, it is your responsibility to remain calm throughout the exchange. If you find yourself getting worked up (or your emotions begin clouding your judgment), walk away from the exchange and give yourself time to calm down.

It is impossible to make rational and logical decisions, without remaining calm and level-headed. Easier said than done, perhaps, but this is exactly why you need to know when to draw the line and walk away from a heated exchange.

## **Collected**

If you are confident and calm, collected will come naturally. When you deal with a complaint ensure you have all the information you need or that you can get hold of it easily. Never let a guest think that you are unprepared or unable to deal with their issue.

## **The Most Common Complaints**

You'd be surprised how creative some guests can be when it comes to their complaints. Alongside these weird and wonderful complaints, however, are the more common issues you will deal with on a regular basis.

In a hotel environment, you can expect to encounter the following complaints more frequently than most:

1. Complaints regarding the hygiene and cleanliness of the room. This concerns either a first time guest dissatisfied with the cleanliness of the room or a regular guest who has become used to better standards during their previous visits.
2. Issues regarding the quality of the food in the restaurant, or perhaps the service they received while dining. They may or may not have brought the issue to the attention of the restaurant manager at the time.

3. Many guests complain that they were unable to sleep properly, due to excessive noise from one source or another. The source may have been from within the hotel (other guests, air conditioning etc.) or from outside the hotel (traffic noise etc.).
4. If a guest arrives with a booking but you have no vacant rooms in your hotel, they will almost certainly complain about the prospect of being out-booked.
5. There will always be guests who have unrealistic expectations regarding your hotel and its facilities. They may simply complain that the hotel in general did not meet their expectations.

### **Wants vs Needs**

When dealing with complaints, it is important to know how to draw the line between 'wants' and 'needs'. Every guest has a specific set of requirements that absolutely must be met. By contrast, there are certain optional extras that are not strictly necessary, but may be preferable or even considered important by some guests.

**A want is something the guest would like to have. It is not a pre-requisite requirement, nor is it necessary.**

**A need is something the guest must have and cannot be without.**

Something that one guest considers a 'need' may be a 'want' for a second guest. For example, an individual with limited mobility may need an accessible room, whereas an able bodied guest may simply request an accessible room as they'd prefer the additional space and amenities.

Making sense of complaints means taking into account whether the guest's needs and/or wants were satisfied. This is particularly important when a guest makes a complaint during their stay, which they would prefer to be addressed immediately. Meeting the needs of the guest should always take priority - anything optional being a side-issue.

Consider the following examples:

1. A guest has been placed in a double room when they requested a twin. It is 2 sisters sharing the room. They are unhappy at having a double bed as they do not want to share - they are therefore asking for two separate rooms.

This is a tricky situation, when considering the wants and needs of the guests. On one hand, you could argue that their primary need was accommodation in your hotel for the two nights they booked, which they have been provided with. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the guests, two separate beds could be a non-negotiable requirement. The fact that they have been forced to share a bed may not be a big deal to you, but could be an enormous issue to the guests.



However, it's worth noting that the guests have requested two separate rooms to resolve the issue. If you have one or more vacant rooms in your hotel with two separate beds, allocating two separate rooms isn't strictly necessary. As a result, their request becomes a want, rather than a need. It will therefore be up to you to determine the best way to resolve their issue, which may be a case of considering occupancy levels at the time.

2. A guest states that they want a refund because of the noise levels in their room. They are being disturbed by other guests and are unhappy with the size of the room as it is too small, so they want to be transferred to a larger room.

There are a few issues to take into account with this complaint. Primarily, the guest booked a room at your hotel because he or she needs a place to sleep. If they are unable to sleep due to noise levels in the room, their needs are not being satisfied. Hence, you are in a position where it is your obligation to do something about it. However, their dissatisfaction with the *size* of the room and their subsequent request for a larger room represents a want. As this is purely a case of the guest's personal preferences, it isn't a requirement.

In addition, it's worth noting that the guest has requested not only a different room, but also a refund. Transferring the guest to a different room (if possible) to satisfy their needs is your priority. However, the request for a refund on top of the transfer is technically just a want. You'll therefore need to consider the specifics of the complaint and the complainer, in order to determine whether or not they are entitled to a refund, or simply a new room.

### The Complaint Triangle

It's said that every complaint comprises three things:

**Cause** – All complaints have a cause, as in something that triggered the complaint.

**Emotion** – The issue must create an emotional response in the complainer - anger, disappointment, distress, anxiety, upset, embarrassment, fear etc.

**Desire** – The guest must also have the desire to complain and feel both compelled and justified to raise the issue, and has the desire to get something out of it.

If any of these factors is removed from the equation, the complaint will not be raised or sustained. Hence, the elimination of these factors should be a priority.

## Cause

The best way to avoid complaints is to prevent common issues from happening in the first place. This is precisely why the vast majority of hotels keep detailed logs of complaints and issues raised. Sooner or later, you begin to notice patterns in the types of complaints being brought to your attention by customers. Common examples of which include room cleanliness, interior and exterior noise, dissatisfaction with meals served in the restaurant, bathroom cleanliness and so on. When this record is analysed, it becomes clear where improvements can and should be made.

A basic complaint log should record and store the following information at least:

- Complaint date
- Complainant name
- Complainant address
- Complainant contact number
- Complainant email address
- Complainants stay date (when they were in-house)
- Department (complaint is about)
- Category (type of complaint)
- Comments (specific details of the complaint)
- Employee dealing with the issue
- Offer made
- Value of offer (or nearest estimate)
- Resolved (yes or no depending whether the guest has used the offer, for example a free stay)
- Date resolved

Modern complaint logs are almost always kept and stored digitally, making it quick and easy to access and evaluate the information therein. As a rule of thumb, if you receive more than one complaint about the same issue, you can guarantee future complaints along the same lines - if you don't immediately address the problem.

## Emotion

The difficulty with the emotional side of complaints management is the fact that you can't and won't necessarily see things from the same perspective as the customer. What matters to them may be completely inconsequential to you. In addition, the fact that they have brought something to your attention means it has already triggered some kind of emotional response. If not, they wouldn't have bothered reporting it to you in the first place.

This is why the elimination of the emotion aspect of the 'complaints triangle' can be tricky. Nevertheless, it is a process that begins from the very first moment of contact. In a working example, consider checking into a hotel and having a fantastic experience at reception. You immediately 'click' with the receptionist, your first impressions of the hotel couldn't be better and you enter your room with a smile on your face. If you were to then note a couple of minor imperfections, would you be likely to run down to reception and scream in the face of the receptionist?

How would the situation be different, if you'd had an uninspiring experience at reception and were already disappointed by the time you entered the room?

If the above is irrelevant as you've already received a complaint, the key is to remain factual and logical at all times. Try not to deal with the issue in an emotional way - maintain objectivity and professionalism at all times. Your goal is to encourage the complainer to see things from an equally objective perspective, removing emotions from the equation where possible.

## **Desire**

Desire refers to the guest's justification or motivation for bringing the complaint to your attention. First of all, this means that the issue must be significant enough for the guest to take the time to report it to hotel staff. Again, this is something that varies massively from one guest to the next. Take a stray hair in the bathroom, for example - inconsequential to some, completely unacceptable to others.

In addition, desire also refers to the intention of the complainer to motivate some kind of action/outcome on the part of the hotel. For some, the desire could simply be to ensure the issue is addressed for the benefit of future guests. It may also be a regular guest who's genuinely looking out for the best interests of your hotel. At the opposite end of the scale, you have those whose desire is nothing more than personal financial gain.

For obvious reasons, there isn't a great deal you can do to eliminate desire from the equation. However, it's possible to influence a guest's desire where complaints are concerned by excelling in all other areas. Once again, if you delight a guest from the moment they arrive, they're far less likely to have the desire to make unfair or unrealistic compensation demands. They're also more likely to bring things to your attention for your own benefit, rather than theirs.

Once a guest has the desire to complain (and to get something out of it), there's very little you can do to change their mind. Hence, it's better to focus on subduing this kind of desire in the first place.

## **Standardisation**

Standardisation refers to the phenomenon where our personal expectations and standards change in accordance with our environment and influences. The longer we spend in one specific environment, the greater the extent to which our standards and expectations are affected.

In a typical working example, you may find yourself checking in a guest who has never stayed in a quality hotel before. If their only prior accommodation experience has been hostels, tents, caravans and so on, they're likely to be highly impressed by the amenities of even a moderate-quality hotel. This is because their past experience set a standard, which has to some extent be improved upon.

At the opposite end of the scale, a business guest who usually stays in five-star luxury suites may be forced to stay in a three-star hotel due to a lack of availability. Despite the fact that the three star-hotel is of an excellent standard, he or she may consider it to be significantly below their expectations. It's in no way an issue with the hotel directly - it's simply that the guest has become used to different standards.

When complaints are encountered due to standardisation, there's very little you can do about it. There will always be instances where guests expect so much more than you can deliver. In such instances, however, you need to carefully consider the whole 'wants' vs 'needs' argument. Just because the guest 'wanted' a more luxurious hotel doesn't mean they 'needed' it - nor does it mean they are necessarily eligible for compensation.

## **Transference**

This is something we all do, subconsciously or otherwise. On a pretty regular basis, you will encounter guests who say "When we stayed at XXX, they did YYY" or "XXX Hotel does YYY". Roughly translated, it's a case of comparing a past product, service or experience to something similar from the present.

Transference can be positive or negative. If the guest's previous experience was dissatisfactory, they're more likely to be happy with whatever you have to offer. By contrast, if their previous experience was exceptional, it may be fundamentally impossible for you to equal or better it with your own products and services. In the case of the latter, it is inevitable that you will occasionally encounter guests who do nothing but criticise your hotel from top to bottom, having encountered something superior in the past.

Rather than looking down on complainers who make unfair or unrealistic comparisons, it's better to accept transference for what it is. Transference is a simple matter of human nature and human psychology - one that is extremely difficult to avoid.

## Handling complaints

You can plan as intensively and comprehensively as you like, but complaint handling is all about expecting the unexpected. It is a predominantly reactive process (as opposed to proactive), because you have no idea how any given guest will act at any given moment. You've also no real way of knowing how they will react/ behave as the resulting conversation plays out. Once again, therefore, it's a case of building the confidence and knowledge needed to handle all types of complaints and complainers, while accepting that no two complaints will ever be the same.

### Email/Written Complaints

Let's have a look at a written complaint email and see which important elements you can spot. See if you can identify the type of complainer, what issues they encountered, what standardisation had occurred previously and any transference there may be:

#### *FAO FRONT DESK MANAGEMENT*

*We travel to Sheffield on a regular basis and have used several hotels in your vicinity. Unfortunately, we don't believe that your online advertising materials paint an accurate picture of your hotel's location. In addition, we arrived early for a bite to eat, but were informed by the receptionist that the restaurant was closed due to a private function. We were therefore advised to head to the restaurant next door, which wasn't really the kind of place we were looking for.*

*When we finally checked into our room, we immediately noted a few cleanliness issues. Two of the bulbs in the bedroom needed replacing (which your receptionist immediately organised) and there was a build-up of mildew in a corner of the bathroom. We headed down to dinner quite early during the evening, though two of the four items we requested were already unavailable. Not that we were informed until we had taken the time to decide on our order.*

*Then at breakfast the next morning, the group that had occupied the restaurant the day before at lunchtime had clearly arrived all at the same time. Hence, we couldn't get a table and had to wait for 15 minutes to even sit down.*

*We're not normally the types to complain, but this was our first experience at your hotel and we left somewhat disappointed. We'd love to recommend your hotel to others, but on the basis of our previous stay we'd be unable to do so. I'd appreciate a response when you have time, if only to acknowledge that you have received and read this account of our stay.*

In terms of assessing the type of complainer, you could argue that this the individual is a cross between a social complainer and a compensatory complainer. They talk about recommending your hotel to others and also state that they do not normally make

complaints. There's nothing particularly aggressive and there are no demands for compensation, but to fail to offer at least a token gesture could result in escalation.

### **Assessing the complaint**

Taking a look at the specific issues, we can see that the guest reported:

1. Hotel advertising not clear on location
2. Being told there was no lunch available, with no prior notice
3. Issues within the room – bulbs out, mildew
4. Lack of food items
5. Long delay at breakfast

From this relatively compact communication, that's a minimum of five issues brought to the attention of the hotel. In addition, we can also see that the guest regularly uses hotels in the same area, which brings standardisation and transference into the equation. With some of the issues - such as the lack of food items and room cleanliness - it is entirely likely that they are simply comparing your hotel to those they have stayed in before.

Nevertheless, each of the issues is technically a justified complaint in its own right. Their needs have more or less been satisfied with the provision of accommodation and breakfast, but in both instances they were somewhat disappointed. Irrespective of whether this disappointment was the result of transference, standardisation or anything else, they have a justified complaint and must be provided with an adequate response.

### **Determining a response**

One of the worst things any business can do is to issue a response that denies all responsibility for the issues raised. At the same time, it's never a good idea to issue for a grovelling apology and beg the forgiveness of the guest. Instead, you should be looking to go with something more balanced. Even if the issues raised by the guest are completely remedial or inconsequential in your eyes, they may be significantly more meaningful to them.

It's also worth remembering that every word you say in the letters and emails you send could come back to haunt you. Unless you are completely fair, factual and professional, your comments could be copied and pasted across any number of influential review sites, social media pages and booking engines. Long story short - never say anything you aren't happy to have published far and wide.

In the case of this particular complaint, you have identified at least five reasons why the customer has left dissatisfied. Each of which is technically based on a want or an expectation, rather than a need. Nevertheless, they also have a very fair case for requesting

compensation - despite the fact that they haven't directly done so.

Here are some of the options available when dealing with complaints:

### **1. Give the guest their stay for free**

In this instance, this is no longer a possibility. The guest has already stayed, paid and checked out, so you can't offer them anything complementary on their past stay.

### **2. Refund the guest for the stay**

This tends to be the most obvious approach and is usually what the complainer is looking for. It's also quick and easy to sort out. However, it can sometimes set a dangerous precedent for your hotel. Once it becomes clear that guests can stay for free simply by complaining, you may find that more guests start doing exactly that.

### **3. Give the guest a future stay for free**

This is the preferred option for a lot of hotels, as an alternative to simply refunding the guest's money. The reason being that the guest's future stay has a significantly lower monetary value than the actual price paid - i.e. it's cheaper for the hotel than offering a refund. In addition, it also gives the hotel the opportunity to impress the guest and bring them back on board.

### **4. Refund the money they paid for their meals**

As the dissatisfaction primarily involved meals at the hotel, you could simply refund the money they paid for dining in your restaurant. This would indicate that you have taken their complaint seriously and intend to do something about it, without having to go so far as to refund their stay in its entirety.

### **5. Give a future discount on a stay**

Another option preferred by lot of hotels, this typically manifests in the form of a voucher, a code or a letter from the hotel worth say 50% off their next stay. Again, it's a case of indicating that you have taken the complaint seriously and would like the opportunity to welcome them back to your hotel. Under no circumstances should unacceptably-modest discounts be offered - anything lower than 50% off their next stay may be interpreted as an insult and a waste of their time.

### **6. Ignore the complaint**

Quite simply the worst thing you can do - never ignore or delay your response to a complaint.

Your hotel will have its own unique policy regarding its preferred approach to refunds,

discounts and so on. In all instances, however, you need to think very carefully about how you will script your response to the complainer.

For some, the only thing that matters is the fact that they are getting something for free. For others, nothing matters more than knowing their complaint has been taken seriously by your hotel. Responding to complaints as quickly as possible is essential, but rushing a letter to completion and compromising its quality really isn't the way to go.

As soon as you receive a complaint, respond with a message along the following lines, unless it can be handled immediately:

*Dear Mr Jones,*

*Thank you for sharing your feedback with the team at our hotel. We take all complaints and quality issues very seriously and I am sorry to hear that you were dissatisfied with your stay.*

*I have personally forwarded your comments to the relevant department heads, who are investigating the matter at this moment. We will provide a full response within the next 48 hours, though please don't hesitate to contact us by telephone if you have any questions in the meantime.*

*Once again, thank you for giving us the opportunity to resolve your complaint and for taking the time to contact us.*

*Kind regards,*

*(Name)*

*Reception Front Desk*

You'll notice that at no point in this response does the hotel acknowledge any kind of responsibility for any of the issues raised. Nor are any of the specific issues mentioned in this initial response. Instead, this is simply an acknowledgement that the communication has been received and is being dealt with.

This will then allow you sufficient time to deal with the issue, after which an appropriate response can be provided. As a rule of thumb, complaint response letters should comprise three component stages - a beginning, a middle and an end.

- **Beginning** - The first component of the letter takes a very similar form to the acknowledgement letter above. You thank the guest for taking the time to contact you, you indicate your appreciation for raising the issue and you empathise with their dissatisfaction. This sets the tone for the rest of the communication.
- **Middle** - This is where the crux of the issue is discussed, addressing each of the individual complaints raised by the guest and indicating what you have done (or will be doing) to address them.

- **End** - The end of the letter is where you provide a sincere apology (where relevant) for the issues the guest encountered, along with the presentation of your offer.

### Sample Response

*Dear Mr Jones,*

*Firstly, I'd like to thank you again for taking the time to contact our hotel and raise the issues in your email. I assure you that we take all feedback seriously and we're sorry to learn that you were dissatisfied with your stay.*

*Our sales and marketing team is looking into the issue related to our hotel's location and will make the necessary adjustments to the text for clarification. As for your issues regarding our restaurant, the group that occupied the restaurant at lunchtime booked at the very last second, so we were unable to advise guests in advance that the restaurant would be closed. We also encountered the same issue with breakfast - their decision to dine was made at the last moment, which resulted in our restaurant becoming far busier than expected.*

*I apologise on behalf of our food and beverage department, as you should have been informed at the time you were seated in the restaurant as to which menu items were unavailable. I understand your frustrations, having been informed your chosen items were unavailable, only after deciding on your order.*

*Your comments regarding the cleanliness of your room were reported directly to our housekeeping manager. We work hard to maintain the highest possible cleanliness standards and were surprised to hear of the issues with your room - all of which we consider to be unacceptable.*

*As a token of goodwill on our part, we would like to invite you to stay with us again with a discount of 50% on your next stay. This discount will be applicable to all costs incurred during your stay, including accommodation and your total restaurant spend. We would love the opportunity to demonstrate our commitment and improve upon your past experience.*

*Thank you once again for taking the time to contact our hotel, I look forward to hearing from you at your convenience.*

*Kind regards,*

*(Name)*

*Reception Front Desk*

Of course, there are no guarantees that the recipient will be happy with the response. Some will jump for the chance of enjoying a discounted stay, others will think they deserve far more than they have been offered. Hence, you can expect multiple interactions with the same guest regarding the same complaint, before an outright resolution is reached.

Particularly if it was a one-off stay and the guest has no intention of returning to your hotel/area again, discounts like these may be of little to no realistic value.

## Face to face complaints

Dealing with face to face complaints can be particularly challenging for two reasons. First of all, you don't really have any time to discuss the matter with your colleagues and plan a resolution - it's all happening in real-time. Secondly, you may also face the issue of having a whole bunch of on-lookers watching everything that takes place. The latter never being particularly good for the reputation of a hotel.

### **Here is a traditional scenario to consider:**

You are approached by a guest who doesn't look too happy, at a time when you're already buried in important tasks. They tell you that they are not happy with the standard of the room, which doesn't meet their expectations. They also clearly communicate the fact that they are not happy with the room rate.

With absolutely no hesitation, you need to figure out what kind of complainer you are dealing with, what exactly it is they are complaining about, what they expect to get out of it and so on. These are the kinds of times when it is difficult not to become flustered and frustrated, but it's nonetheless your responsibility to remain Calm, Collected, and Confident.

Irrespective of how much pressure you may be under and/or how unpleasant the guest is being, there's really only one thing you can do:

### **DEAL with it - an acronym to remember**

**Divert** the guest away from the reception desk, if only to an accompanying seating area or a lounge. If it's going to be a difficult or time-consuming issue to address, it's better to handle it away from the reception desk. This will help set the right backdrop for the discussion, while also keeping you and the unhappy guest out of the way of other guests and members of staff. Be polite and offer them a coffee or soft drink.

## Empathise with their situation

The key to successful complaint handling across the board - you need to at least *try* to see things from the perspective of the customer. If you expected something, paid good money for it and received something that wasn't satisfactory, you wouldn't be happy. Just because the guest's standards and expectations differ from your own doesn't mean that *you* are right and *they* are wrong.

**Ask** the guest to explain all the issues they have and **listen** to everything they have to say. Once you've given them all the time they need to vent their frustrations, they'll probably be in a much better mood to discuss an amicable resolution. Take everything they say on board and empathise with the fact that they are dissatisfied (without necessarily accepting blame).

With many complaints, reaching a resolution can be as simple as just asking the complainer what they expect from you.

## The magic question

***"How would you like me to resolve this issue for you?"***

It's not always appropriate or necessary to ask the customer what they would like you to do. Ideally, you should be able to come up with a resolution that satisfies their expectations, without having to ask them directly.

In other instances, however, it can be the ultimate stalemate-breaker. By asking the customer how they would like you to resolve the issue, you place the matter squarely in their hands. Depending on the nature of the complaint and the individual presenting it, you can expect one of many responses to this particular question:

The three most common of which being as follows:

1. The guest is somewhat surprised and doesn't know how to answer the question, as they weren't expecting it to be asked.
2. The guest takes the opportunity to state exactly what they want you to do to resolve the issue.
3. The guest returns the question, asking *you* how you intend to resolve the issue and provides no direct suggestions.

**Option 1** isn't usually an issue, unless the guest objects to being asked the question...which is sometimes the case. Otherwise, you've demonstrated your determination to reach a resolution and have also indicated your willingness to listen. After which, you can discuss a resolution that suits the situation.

**Option 2** can be tricky, as you may find that the guest has completely excessive or unrealistic expectations. If they suggest a resolution that's fair and amicable, you're golden.

If they ask for something you're unable or unwilling to offer, it's time to negotiate.

**Option 3** returns control to you, but this isn't necessarily an advantage. If anything, you're back at square one. You could attempt to return the question to the guest in a polite and respectful way, or you could present an offer and see how they react.

The point of the conversation where a direct offer needs to be presented is known as the 'tipping point'. You may find that the tipping point is reached after a lengthy discussion, or comes about surprisingly quickly. When the tipping point is reached, the guest will expect you to present a fair and amicable offer as quickly as possible. If you've asked the magic question and failed, you'll need to think carefully (though quickly) about your next move.

## Responding face to face

### Repeat

When taking note of a customer's complaint face to face (which is something you should always do), it's important to repeat the details of the complaint back to them as you do so. For example, "You were woken at 3am by internal noise which then went on until 5am, is that correct?"

### State your position

If there is something you *cannot* do for the guest, it's important to establish this as quickly as possible. The complaint above could perhaps be resolved by transferring the guest to a different room, but this is simply not possible if your hotel is full. Make sure the guest knows what you can and can't do for them.

### Gain understanding

Make sure the guest understands the reason for your offer. For example, if a guest had a terrible experience in the restaurant, they could be invited for a free meal. Your explanation being that this will give you the opportunity to make up for their negative experience and ensure they leave satisfied. A bad restaurant experience, by contrast, isn't usually justification for a full refund of accommodation costs.

### Follow up

Assuming the guest has not yet checked out of your hotel, make the effort to contact them a little later to ensure everything is OK. If their issues could not be resolved, thank them when they check out for letting you know, empathise with their dissatisfaction and do whatever is necessary to leave things on a positive note.

## Points to take on board with complaint resolution offers

It's worth noting that some complaint resolution offers may be considered inconvenient or irrelevant by your guests. For example, a broken television or dirty bathroom won't be resolved with a free drink at the bar. Likewise, expecting a guest to transfer to a different room at an inconvenient time having already settled in isn't going to delight them.

In addition, what constitutes a fair and perhaps generous offer in your mind may be considered completely unacceptable (or even offensive) by any given guest. It can be difficult to see things from the guest's perspective when dealing with unpleasant or difficult individuals, but that's exactly what you need to do.

You also need to remember that irrespective of the complaint resolution, it will not necessarily alter the opinion of the guest. If they were completely dissatisfied with their stay, simply giving them their money back won't suddenly inspire them to recommend your hotel to their friends and colleagues. This is why the key to successful complaint resolution lies in doing everything you can to turn every negative into a positive.

In some instances, dissatisfied guests are so impressed with the way their complaints are handled that they leave with nothing but positive things to say. Even though they encountered something that was unexpected and perhaps unpleasant, this isn't what they remember about the visit. Instead, they remember the quality of the customer service they were provided with, upon reporting the issue.

From top to bottom, it's the classic case of 'the customer is always right' in action. That being, with the exception of customers who become rude, aggressive or intimidating. As a receptionist, you will encounter a wide variety of complaints from an equally wide variety of complainers on a regular basis. You will be expected to deal with most everyday complaints as they occur, though escalated issues will be handled by senior personnel.

### Further Reading: